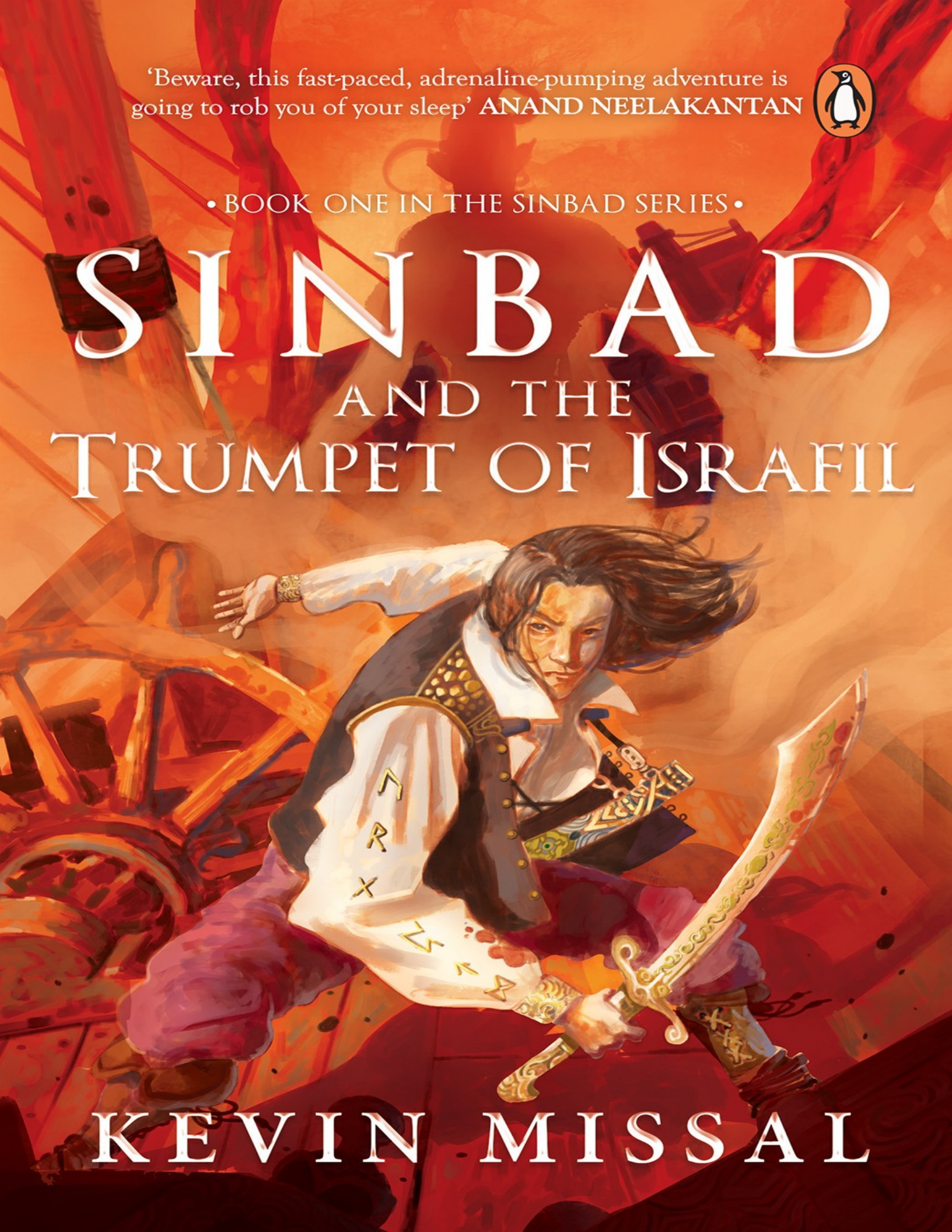
'Beware, this fast-paced, adrenaline-pumping adventure is going to rob you of your sleep' **ANAND NEELAKANTAN**

• BOOK ONE IN THE SINBAD SERIES •

SINBAD AND THE TRUMPET OF ISRAFIL



KEVIN MISSAL

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SINBAD AND THE TRUMPET OF ISRAFIL

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Acknowledgements

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SINBAD AND THE TRUMPET OF ISRAFIL

Kevin Missal is the author of the national bestselling Kalki trilogy. He has also written the Narasimha trilogy and *Raavanputr Meghnad* , along with establishing his own marketing agency called HubHawks that caters to authors. He immensely enjoys the look on people's faces when they find out that he's done all of this at the tender age of twenty-four. That too without an MBA. Kevin resides in Gurugram in a library that he lovingly calls 'my room'. When he's not reading or writing, he loves to interact with his readers on his social media handles (Instagram: kevin_9695 and Twitter: kevin_missal).

Advance Praise for the Book

‘Kevin Missal has given the age-old Sinbad tale a delightful spin. Beware, this fast-paced, adrenaline-pumping adventure is going to rob you of your sleep’

—Anand Neelakantan

Dedicated to Rick Riordan . . .

The man who made me wish I was a demigod

Sometime during the eighth century ...

When the Abbasid caliphate reigned
in the land of Arabia ...

Monsters roamed the lands and the seven seas ...

Some hidden, some visible to the eye ...

And the ones who hunted them were called the Seid.

ONE

They reached the Island of the Damned.

Sinbad wanted to hold his master’s scarred fingers, but he was afraid of the rebuke. He would be called weak. Frail. A child. Scolded for being frightened and getting the heebie-jeebies. His slight, twelve-year-old frame shivered at the sight of the dense and foggy landscape ahead of him.

It was here where the creature was seen.

Swallowing a lump of fear, Sinbad looked at his master. Middle-aged and greying, and with a scar on his forehead, he stood there, unmoving. He had an aquiline nose. His eyes, as pale as a snow leopard’s and cold like whetstone, watched the island in front of him with a lethal gaze, as if studying everything—things that moved and those that didn’t. The island was concealed within the mists, abounding with long trees that had twigs resembling an old crone’s hands. Vultures loomed like predators, ready to strike. It smelled of sulphur for some reason, and the sound, if there was any, was of silence.

Sinbad would do anything to know what his master was thinking at the moment, of what lay behind those dense eyes. He wanted to know him. After all, the man was the only close relation he’d had. Ever. The only face he had seen since birth and the face he had grown accustomed to. The others that he had met were distant and seemed alien to him.

Their ship halted with a jerk. Puzzled, Sinbad looked around. They were still fifty yards away from the shore of the island. Why dock so far?

‘Master Reis?’ the captain said, emerging from the lower deck with the answer to Sinbad’s question. He was a Persian with a hoarse voice and a thick beard. His dark coal-like eyes were peering at Sinbad’s master.

But his master didn’t shift his gaze. Nor spoke.

‘We cannot go forward...’ the captain fumbled for words when he heard nothing but silence. ‘It’s too, um, dangerous for us. The creature ... It might attack us.’

Master Reis still seemed unfazed. The tension in the air was palpable. Sinbad could hear the squawks of several seagulls somewhere in the distance. The smell of seaweed engulfed his nostrils.

‘We will get a boat for you. One of our men will drop you off and you can send us a signal when the job is done. We will then come to pick you up. We have enough stock to live on for the weeks we’ll have to wait. But we cannot, um, go forward. This is where we stop.’

It was then that Master Reis finally spoke.

‘Ain’t there a village inside?’ he whispered in a broken accent, his voice very thin, slithering through the invisible air.

‘Yes, Master Reis,’ the captain answered.

‘And a bunch of your men too?’

‘Yes. There was a garrison in the village, before the, um, attacks happened. We had sent a raven beforehand so that they know all of you are coming. Well, at least, the ones who are alive. Though we didn’t know it would only be a man and a..he looked at Sinbad, saying, ‘a child.’

‘And yet,’ Master Reis turned his cold gaze on the captain and continued, ‘you and your men don’t wanna go?’ His inert eyes stared into the captain’s, piercing his soul. ‘Even to save your men. Why?’

‘We just... Well, I don’t mind, but my men, they feel we should have... that we should act like a backup if something goes wrong at your end and

not risk ourselves from the outset,' he justified. 'They... they just feel that... we can't fight the creature.'

'But there's a village filled with civilians—harmless civilians,' his cold voice rose, 'poorly armed, unlike you. Aren't they risking their necks?'

'They are lucky, master!' the captain scoffed nervously, fidgeting. 'That the creature didn't get them. They just don't know when or who will be the next one. It's like counting down the days to your end when you know it is out there, coming for you.'

Master Reis nodded. Sinbad could see he was disappointed and he knew why. He never liked cowards, deserters. For him, they were already dead.

'Get the boat, we will row ourselves,' he said, snapping his fingers. 'No need to risk any one of your men,' rasped Master Reis.

The captain was flustered, but nodded and left.

Sinbad's blood was pumping hard as he saw Master Reis's eyes swivelling to focus on him.

'Do you know how to row, boy?' he asked. 'Or you too are petrified like these royal, great, grand soldiers of the caliphate?'

Sinbad lowered his eyes. He felt his heart punching his chest as he responded.

'Yes. I... I... know how to row.'

TWO

PRESENT DAY
BASRA, PORT OF ARABIA

The corpse was laid there under the darkening sky.

And Sinbad watched it, in silence, from the bushes.

He could hear his own breathing, his blood pumping in his ears. It was late evening. His almond eyes were focused on the beach, hawk-eyed. Owls hooted. The waves rolled and the blurry skies darkened.

Any time now...

‘Let’s hope the blasted ghoul takes the bait,’ said Husayn, his blue eyes scanning the area. He flicked his frizzy, curly hair back and looked at his friend who crouched down beside him. ‘There’s a lot of money we’re gonna get out of this, tee-hee,’ he said, referring to the tavern owner who had hired Sinbad to end the horror of the Qutrub.

Sinbad turned his head and looked up, his onyx hair falling over his forehead. ‘For the hundredth time, it’s not a ghoul. It’s a subclass of jinnis.’

‘Apples and oranges, to be honest.’ Husayn shook his head in dismay. ‘How do you kill it?’

‘You can’t.’ Sinbad sighed. ‘You trap them and then send them back. Or keep them locked in a ring or something. And one of the easiest ways to do it is by knowing their true name.’

‘Well, whatever it is, you have no clue how tough it was to get that,’ said Husayn, pointing to the dark mound that they had been eyeing. ‘Let’s see: paid the gravedigger; dug up the ground with him; got drenched in mud; and then finally got it for our friend, the Qutrub, here because you said it would be the perfect bait.’

‘Well, at least you were helpful this time.’ Sinbad rolled his eyes and decided to look at the stars that remained still, distracting himself from the beach. It was only a few times in his life that he had caught them blinking.

‘I’m always helpful, all right?’ Husayn said, his voice growing louder in protest.

Sinbad darted his eyes back to the beach and the corpse. ‘No, please, do yell some more and let the whole world know what we are doing.’

‘Apologies!’ Husayn whispered. ‘And the world knows already. That thing has already killed twenty of our travellers. If more would become its victims, taverns might as well close down.’

‘I know.’ Sinbad sighed.

‘You said it’s a jinni, though, right?’ Husayn asked. ‘But aren’t jinnis like wish-granting baboons?’

‘Not all,’ Sinbad said and shook his head ever so slightly. ‘Only the Marids. While the thing we are waiting for right now is called a Qutrub. Strange creatures. They come from the jinni world of Barzakh. But what I don’t understand is, Qutrubs feed on the dead, and thus are seen around graveyards. Then why is it attacking the living?’ He narrowed his eyes in contemplation.

But before he could mull it over, Sinbad saw the unlikely: A couple walking on the shore, a few yards away from their bait, oblivious to it and the gruesome presence that it would invite.

They were busy chatting and laughing. Barefoot. The girl was wearing her veil and the man a sailor’s tunic.

‘Humans. Always butting in when they are not supposed to.’ Sinbad gritted his teeth.

‘Aren’t you a human yourself, my dear friend?’ Husayn cheekily asked.

‘Well...’ Sinbad said, ‘the Qutrub would attack them then. Fresh blood.’

‘Um, Sinbad?’ Husayn tapped on his shoulder.

‘What?’ he snapped as his eyes followed the couple’s steps, hoping they won’t notice the trap that had been set on the beach. But the smell would be a dead giveaway!

And they were close... getting closer...

‘Um, Sinbad? Would you please turn around?’ Husayn’s voice had turned into an almost high-pitched scream.

‘What?’ shrieked Sinbad, irritated, as he turned towards Husayn. And it was then that he saw it. A ghastly eight-foot-tall creature-skeletal, scarlet red, dressed in rags. Its elongated mouth and slits, in place of a nose, quivered. A long, black ponytail on its otherwise bald head was the only hair it had. Its ribs were visibly jutting out of its diaphragm. Even the spine was visible, protruding from the skinless skeleton. But the eyes—they were pitch-black as if the creature had no irises. It was so close to him, breathing hard. And it was then that their eyes met.

If that weren’t bad enough, then came a bone-chilling scream. From the side of the beach where the unknowing couple stood.

Great. They found the corpse.

THREE

FOUR YEARS AGO

‘You row like a child,’ said Master Reis.

I am twelve. I am a child.

But Sinbad kept such remarks to himself, otherwise he would be considered insolent. He kept paddling, as strongly as he could, while his master leant back and observed the island.

‘We go into the depths of horror, of madness. This is the mouth of the supernatural, of monstrosity,’ said Master Reis. ‘Do you realize the gravity of this mission, boy?’

Sinbad nodded, his jet-black hair flopping over his eyes. He had a well-defined jawline, which made him look older than his age. A tunic that had myriad ancient runes made on it hung on him loosely and a scabbard dangled from his tiny baldric.

‘You look confused. What is it?’

Sinbad had a ridiculous question in his mind but seemed to think better of it. So he continued rowing, ignoring the question.

‘Speak,’ his master added coldly.

Sinbad hesitated. ‘It’s uh... it’s just that the caliph commissioned us, requested us to fight the thing that has been terrorizing this island, hurting

his garrison and islanders ... but like ... can’t he have an army sent up here to fight the thing?’

‘You question as if you don’t understand our guild’s purpose, boy. We do what others can’t. We seek what others are afraid of. For the caliph, having to do anything with the monster world is too much of a headache. So he hired the specialists. Even his thousand men can’t do what we can. We know sorcery and we know what hurts the creatures. And we do it without asking for anything in return,’ Master Reis explained.

Sinbad nodded, paddling harder. ‘But his men, the ones who dropped us till here, shouldn’t they be assisting us?’

‘Fear confines their wits, boy. Do not be hassled by what the mortals speak of. If the caliph wouldn’t have ordered them to drop us to the island, they won’t have even volunteered,’ Master Reis jeered. ‘They don’t care about the islanders and their men here. For them, it’s already a lost cause. They are already dead. But we, the Seid, do not give up on people. We don’t give in to the darkness. We strive for hope. We fight for justice. We fight against evil.’

Master Reis narrowed his gaze. ‘Row faster.’ He said it so quietly that it was worse than being yelled at.

With his leftover energy, Sinbad rowed to the shore. When the view of the land welcomed them, Sinbad stepped out of the boat and secured it to one of the rocks.

Master Reis got down and patted Sinbad to get started. And so he did by taking in the sights of the island—the thick canopies, the green vines and the faint beam of light that cut through the dense fog.

Sinbad noticed a flag that was stuck into the ground, a few metres away from where they had docked. On taking a closer look, he found the flag to be of the Abbasid Empire—the unmistakable half-moon on the black background. And it was torn, as if scratched and scorched by some other-worldly being.

‘Oi, there!’ came a voice.

Sprinting towards them was a short man with a metal sword tied to his belt. He was wearing a long tunic, tight pyjamas and a turban that covered half his face.

‘Are you the Seids?’ the trooper panted. ‘Bismillah!’ He glanced at Sinbad. ‘You are a child. I’d heard the rumours. Can’t believe they’re true. Your guild catches them young, quite young.’

Sinbad flared his nostrils. He didn’t like being called ‘young’. He had been training to be a Seid since he was six years old.

‘Though I have always been curious about how the Seids are humans and yet they fight monsters. How?’ the trooper asked.

‘Knowledge is our weapon,’ Master Reis said calmly as he approached them. ‘With the right knowledge, we are able to hunt the toughest of monsters. Now tell me, if your chit-chat is over, what is happening on this island?’

The trooper’s face turned grim. ‘Where are the other men? I thought... I thought they would come.’

‘They want us to finish the job first.’

‘Cowards!’ the trooper grunted. ‘Let me take you to my commander.’ He began walking towards the jungle and Sinbad followed him with his master. ‘It began with a body we found... It had been pecked and eaten; what was left of it, though, was probably just a part of its head and its limbs. And then later, we found the rest of the parts.’

Sinbad felt like retching, but looking up at his master walking along calmly, he digested the information.

‘We prefer to hide whenever it appears ... otherwise we might meet the same fate as the others. We don’t know what it is and that... is what scares us even more.’ The trooper then turned to a pebble-strewn path where

lanterns hung from the branches of a tree and drops of dry, black blood were spattered on the ground. ‘It’s so mysterious that we make up stories around it, especially after what we found recently—its shell.’

‘Its shell?’

‘Oh yah, the commander will show you.’ The trooper shivered. ‘The commander has brought all the villagers to the garrison compound. Safer, you see.’

They walked through the isolated village. Sinbad saw abandoned huts, ravaged roofs and thrashed pots wherever he looked. Standing outside were guards with crossbows while other guards ransacked the huts for utensils and basic resources. They looked at Sinbad and his master with hope in their eyes and a little bit of nervousness as the trio passed by.

‘Unlike your friends back at the ship,’ Master Reis began, ‘you and your lot are quite brave to be standing out in the open.’

‘It doesn’t come in the mornings,’ said the trooper. ‘It’s more of a night creature, so we aren’t really brave, just smart.’ They were on an isolated path, which led to the garrison compound, a bamboo structure that towered over the rest of the trees. The man stopped walking and leant closer to the two. ‘Before you meet the commander, I want you to know that...’ he whispered to Master Reis, ‘I have a theory... and this is the theory that all the villagers believe in. But not the soldiers. They think... um ... they think we are wrong. But

I believe this creature is summoned by someone.’

‘Summoned?’ Master Reis’s eyes shot up.

‘Yes ... by a witch. A sorceress. She runs in the wild. We’ve never seen her in the daytime, but she comes at night.’ The trooper fidgeted with the hilt of his sword. ‘I believe if you burn her, like how you’d deal with a witch, everything will return to normal. The creature will die. You have to believe me ... Please.’

Master Reis remained impassive. ‘Name.’

‘Safeena Umair,’ the man began, shivering a little, ‘and believe it or not, she’s just fourteen years old.’

FOUR

PRESENT DAY

Amidst the wails and cries Sinbad heard from behind him, no sound matched the silence that rang between him and the flesheating jinni he was looking at.

Husayn, who was one of the most talkative people Sinbad had come across, was frozen to the spot, his pupils dilating with fear.

Sinbad collected himself and tried to recall what Master Reis had taught him about Qutrubs.

Thinking of me? A monstrous voice suddenly boomed in the corridors of his mind.

Of course. Qutrubs don’t speak, but they can do telepathy with whomever they want to communicate. In a flash, Sinbad emptied his mind. If the Qutrub gets to know what he was thinking, it would know his weakness. And that could be dangerous.

The jinni inched closer and bent down. It opened its mouth, revealing its raw muscles moving inside.

As Sinbad braced himself for the worst, he heard a movement beside him that was accompanied by a loud chattering of teeth. Husayn.

A cloud of dark smoke engulfed their bodies. Great. The Qutrub has opened its mouth.

Sinbad looked up at the Qutrub and just then, thick whirls of smoke filled the atmosphere, darting soundlessly towards him in a serpentine path.

I finally found you.

What do you want? Sinbad asked telepathically, his eyes transfixed on the Qutrub.

I want to return.

Where?

To my world.

Sinbad knew what it meant.

The killing of humans. It was to lure me out of there.

Of course. Why else?

Even though the creature's face remained expressionless, it added in a hoarse voice, When I came to the mortal world by accident, I felt frustrated. I fed on the dead. I wanted to go home. But then... then.. . I heard about you. The one from Al-Nuhrad's tribe. Hope seized me and I tried to find you, but you had vanished. Until one day, I did find you. Doing a Job under an alias. You didn't want anyone to know about your existence. So

I had no option but to terrorize the people here. I had to find you one way or the other.

Sinbad remained silent. He felt stupid and helpless. He let innocent lives suffer because of his selfish decision to stay undercover and not reveal himself as a Seid. In those days, he would often hunt creatures in his spare time when the money was good. The powers that he possessed paved the way for him to get rich quick, so he was clearly in it for the dirhams. His guild wouldn't approve of this if they knew about it. But then, who's telling?

How did you teleport accidentally?

Well ...I was pranking a fellow of mine and I ended up being pranked myself.

How old are you?

Six hundred years.

Sinbad raised his brows. You’re a kid? A sociopathic one at that.

Kid? A mouthful of grey smoke enveloped Sinbad. You, of all people, know thatjinnis are callous about mortal lives. For us, mortals are like ants.

Sinbad gritted his teeth. Yeah, believe it or not, that’s quite a compliment according to me. I have often compared them to protozoans. But anyway, I don’t know how to open a portal to Barzakh.

LIES! The jinni stepped closer, the stench of blood infiltrated Sinbad’s nostrils. I see your tunic. You have Celtic runes painted on it to protect yourself. A shield! You wear topaz and sapphire rings on your ring finger on each hand. I know you know sorcery. So do not lie. I need to... go back to my world.

Sinbad was taken aback. The Qutrub knew him quite well.

Why?

My mama ...My mother would be worried about me.

Sinbad noticed the utter desperation in its voice.

‘What is ... going... on?’ Husayn finally spoke, his teeth still chattering.

‘Shush!’ Sinbad sharply turned his head. Husayn zipped his lips, but he kept shivering.

The creature went quiet as well. Behind them, Sinbad could hear the girl shrieking and yelling as coast guard officers inquired her about the

body. The plan, which Sinbad had concocted, had taken a whole different direction.

Sighing, he looked down at his white tunic that gave it away. He cursed himself for not wearing his maroon overcoat tonight, which hid his shield well. So naive of him to reveal his identity to this toddler jinni. Seids didn't wear armour or hold shields. The runes painted on their clothes protected them from demons and otherworldly things. It didn't make them invincible but repelled the intense supernatural attacks that, if executed on a mere mortal, could lead to instant death. Sinbad cracked his knuckles in frustration. The blasted rings! The blinking blue of the sapphire shone through the mist.

You know it's against our guild's code. I can't help you now. You have killed twenty mortals. Sinbad sighed. He wanted to send the jinni packing, but breaking the supreme laws of the guild that bound all Seids like him would have terrible consequences. The most I can do is get you a good sentence in the prison by negotiating with the lawyers at the guild and get you an early release. See, if you hadn't harmed a mortal's life, I would have opened a...

And that was when the Qutrub extended its talons—not towards Sinbad, but at Husayn—and grabbed his throat, lifting him in midair until his feet dangled frantically inches above the ground.

Yes? You were saying? the Qutrub mused sarcastically.

Husayn, already pale from the shock and fear, struggled and gasped for air. His hands clutched at the jinni's fingers, his eyes pleading as he turned to his friend.

Leave him. Sinbad calmly requested the Qutrub.

Will you help me or not?

Sinbad sighed. If he agreed, he would be going against the Seid code and the repercussions would put him in trouble with the guild. Not now, but

one day... he might have to face the music. And if he didn’t, his only friend would be choked to death right in front of him.

Okay, fine. Sinbad thought-communicated. I shall open the portal foryou.

FIVE

FOUR YEARS AGO

The compound reeked of dread.

Sinbad looked around and saw the ashen faces of the civilians and the soldiers. He spotted African blacksmiths sharpening blades on whetstones and a group of Jews in overlarge, multicoloured robes chatting among themselves. The armourer was repairing cracks in the gauntlets and breastplates heaped up before him. There were Abbasid Empire flags flying in every corner. The compound had a bricked fortress that lay in ruins.

‘Many come out during this time. The safest time as they say,’ explained the trooper to Master Reis.

Adjusting a rucksack that hung over his shoulders, Sinbad followed his tall, hulking master. His eyes fell on the catapults that held onyx-coloured rocks as big as Sinbad himself.

Must be used to kill something big, he deduced as they entered the fortress to find soldiers standing guard, spears in hands, across the main hall. Sitting in a room, behind an oak wood table, was a bald man with a thick beard and crystal black eyes. By the look of him, he was Persian. He was talking to two villagers. ‘Don’t worry. After the boar was seen, the hunting party was dispatched the next morning and if Allah, peace be upon him, permits, you shall get it back any time now.’

‘Thank you, commander,’ said one of the villagers, clasping his hands together. ‘Nowadays, we are struggling to get sufficient portions of beans

and lentils. Import has been stopped ever since the dark times began on this island. We are famished.'

'Do not fret. Just protect your homes, use the iron we gave you.' The villagers nodded and left. The commander sighed deeply and leant back in his chair. Just then the trooper entered with Master Reis and Sinbad.

'Commander Qasim?' The trooper began.

The high-ranking officer looked up. His eyes were warm and kind, thought Sinbad.

'I brought you company,' the foot soldier smiled. 'It's uh... well ... it's the monster hunters.'

'Seids,' breathed Qasim. 'Didn't think the caliph indulged in wizardry.'

Master Reis responded, 'We aren't wizards, but we do practise wizardry. I'm Master Reis and this is my apprentice Sinbad.'

Qasim nodded at the soldier and Master Reis, but paid little heed to Sinbad. 'Thank you, Captain Abdul, for bringing them here. You are relieved.'

Sinbad looked at the trooper who nodded back, bowed and winked at Sinbad before leaving.

'How can we be of assistance, Commander Qasim?' asked Reis.

'If you can, go back and convince the caliph to bring a hundred ships that can devour the damn creature. They're lucky it's limited to here, on this island, but if it gets away, the end of the world is nigh.' Qasim finished grimly and sprung to his feet. He picked up a yellow sheet of paper from the table and held it high. 'One of my soldiers who saw it drew this sketch.'

Sinbad's beady eyes grew wide as he moved his small frame and stepped forward to peer at the paper along with Reis.

He shuddered. It was a sketch of a bird. It had a long burnt beak and a disfigured head.

‘It’s like an eagle,’ said the commander. ‘Weird, isn’t it?’

‘Not an eagle,’ Reis muttered quietly to himself, clutching on to the yellow paper. ‘No. It’s something far more sinister.’

Sinbad heard the fear in Master Reis’s voice and it sent shivers down his spine. Because it was as rare as seeing him laugh.

‘What is it?’ Qasim asked, his voice trembling, having noticed the strange reaction.

‘I need to check the books for that, but I believe I have seen this picture before. Is there an inn where we can check-in?’ Reis asked.

‘Yes, we’ll get a shack ready for you in the compound.’

Reis nodded and began, ‘I heard a tale about some girl. Rumour is she brought this misery to your island.’

‘Hogwash,’ blurted the commander, ‘village gossip. You know fear brings the worst out of people. Truth is there’s a feral child in the wild. They’ve seen her sometimes. They believe she’s doing it and that she’s some kind of a sorceress. Now, I don’t believe all of this. What kind of child is capable of controlling this abomination?’ He tapped on the paper, on the mutated bird’s sketch.

‘The kind of child that shouldn’t exist,’ Reis whispered, his eyes not leaving the hastily drawn monster.

‘What?’ Qasim arched his brows.

‘Nothing.’ Reis pursed his lips. ‘Why would they think it’s the girl?’

Slumping back in his chair, Qasim guffawed, ‘You really want to know gossip?’

‘Yes.’

‘You are quite a beast hunter, aren’t you?’ scoffed the commander. ‘It’s, well... there’s this story that when she was born, her mother died. They say it was not due to one of the usual complications during delivery, like blood loss, but out of fear that she knew she’d given birth to some she-devil or whatnot. As I said, I don’t believe this crap, but the midwife who tended her swears it’s the truth and that she saw it with her own eyes.’

‘Is the midwife still alive?’

‘She’s an old bat and doesn’t remember a thing. This is all second-hand knowledge, Master Reis. Passed on by people I don’t trust.’ Qasim paused. ‘Anyway, her father took care of her. She had three brothers, too, but slowly, one by one, they began to die—one killed by a wolf, one in an accident and one struck by malaria. The father grew weary, especially when he heard the incessant stories spread by the villagers. They didn’t want her here or anywhere near them. I guess he, too, began to believe that she was cursed or that she was the Devil. So, he took her to the wild and left her there, away from the village.’

Sinbad’s heartbeat grew louder. He shifted uneasily under his weight and clutched his white shirt that was covered in rune drawings.

‘Strange thing though,’ Qasim said and leant forward, ‘the ... the creature surfaced after this incident, sort of like a revenge for this injustice against her. So people now think that the creature would be at peace only after killing everyone here.’

‘Who did the creature attack first?’ Reis asked.

‘What?’

‘You heard me.’

The commander blinked. ‘It was the father.’

Reis sighed, a smile creeping on to his face. ‘I see.’

‘It’s a bloody coincidence. I’m sure.’

‘I’m sure as well,’ Reis sarcastically added. ‘They also talk about a shell you found.’

‘Shell? Ah, Abdul must have fed you the wrong information. It’s not a shell, Master Reis. It’s a marvel.’ He quickly grabbed his turban and placed it on his head. Then he said, ‘Come, I’ll show it to you.’

The twelve-year-old followed the two men ahead of him. The dread was beginning to settle inside Sinbad’s heart. He didn’t like this feeling, the utter hopelessness. As they walked, he saw an old lady who had dusky, wrinkly skin sitting outside a shack as a young nurse tended her. She was in a veil and only her eyes were visible.

As if instinctively, she looked at Sinbad. He could feel the goosebumps on the back of his neck. It was as if she was staring

deep into his soul.

Was she the midwife of the devil-girl’s mother?

Sinbad shifted his gaze and hurried his steps to reach the men walking ahead of him. Soon, he realized, they were reaching the outskirts of the compound, leaving from the back gate that was heavily guarded as well. As they left and ventured into the deep forest, a band of twenty soldiers appeared, who formed a semicircle and marched behind them. Sinbad felt protected in their presence.

We’re safe. But from what? he thought. The girl or the creature? The funny part is, the girl scares me more than the bird.

The bird, even though ghastly and mutated, was ... well.. .just a bird. He’d seen worse, be it wraiths or werewolves. But this surely was a peculiar bird. What were its powers? Did it breathe fire—like it had done to destroy the village? Did it have large talons and thus it had finished off so many islanders? Filled with curiosity and burning questions, Sinbad didn’t realize that he was no longer trailing Master Reis and Qasim, who had sped up.

Panicking, he picked up the pace and managed to catch snippets of their conversation.

‘... we’ll need to leave in a short while. We can’t stay there for long, Master Reis. It’s almost dusk,’ Qasim was saying. He had a rough voice—Sinbad now noted—like someone who smoked a lot of pipe.

‘Does this girl come out only in the dark?’

‘If she has, we don’t know. We don’t venture out in the dark as I told you,’ Qasim replied. ‘But... we have seen her during daytime. Well, glimpses of her. Some of my men tried to catch her once, but she vanished in the blink of an eye.’

‘Vanished. I see.’

They reached a clearing where the trees around them were burnt, dead. There were no thick canopies, no autumn leaves blanketing the ground. This was no fairy-tale forest. And in the middle of this dreadful place, there was the thing Qasim wanted to show them.

Without skipping a beat, Reis and Qasim walked ahead.

‘This is it,’ Qasim suddenly announced. ‘We’d found this when we were out hunting. We believe this is where it took birth.’

Sinbad stood there, frozen. His apprehensions increased and it became clear to him why this bird was such a threat. Because in front of him was a hatched egg, the broken shards of the shell sprawled across the land.

The hair on Sinbad’s arms stood on end, for the hatched egg... was as tall as twenty feet.

SIX

PRESENT DAY

How did you know it was me? the Qutrub asked nonchalantly as he held Sinbad's friend tight, who squeaked when gusts of ashy smoke hit his face. My kind, I mean.

Because... Sinbad began. He knelt down and drew a pentacle inside a circle with his finger. The coconut trees in this deserted clearing near the beach stood silent. The way you killed the mortals. You ate their organs, for crying out loud! No eyes. No liver. No heart. Only ajinni would do that. An extremely violent one at that. Not the Marids. They hate violence.

The jinni shuffled its feet and its long, sleek ponytail swayed from side to side. I know, right? Boring lot. And they are the upper-class jinnis for some reason. What a joke. The Qutrub grunted, adjusting a horrified Husayn in its fist to hold him by the waist.

Trying hard not to roll his eyes, Sinbad continued, Yeah, as if you're not.

What?

As I was saying... Poles apart from the Marids are the I frits who love to display their crimes. They are slashers and burners.

A Qutrub, though, falls somewhere in between. I realized that a Qutrub was behind the killings when I found corpses being devoured at the graveyard. I thought that whoever was doing this to the dead must be doing

the same to the living. Plus, there were traces of zinc in the air— your leftover stench, I believe.

The Qutrub shook with laughter, the bones in its spine jangling. You are clever. But not clever enough to bait me. You can’t bait someone who was anticipating its baiter. Tell me, how old are you?

I’ll tell you if you let my friend go. Sinbad telepathized flatly. The pentacle is made and if you have any intention of taking him along with you, I would say, don’t. He’s not really the perfect travelling partner. But he can sing some ballads along the way.

The jinni sighed, exhaling smoke. Its black ponytail lay over its shoulder—close to the nervous but offended Husayn, who flinched away from the black mane in disgust. Sinbad looked up, realizing what the jinni was doing. The ponytail had begun to take on a life of its own and was twisting around Husayn’s neck like a slithery, slick black mamba.

Before I leave him, the Qutrub communicated, I need your name.

Why?

You know why.

Sinbad froze. Sinbad.

Your real name.

Sinbad cursed under his breath. I don’t have one. And let him go.

The Qutrub’s voice then thundered in Sinbad’s mind. Do not lie! I know what you charlatans do. And on top of that you want me to give up the one leverage I have, this buffoon friend of yours, and then trap me within this pentacle you’ve made. You think I can’t understand the nuances of the design? In fact, I’m great at design! It’s my hobby! He spewed pitch-black smoke. If I know your name, you will not be able to cause harm to me and you will have to let me go. So... your name? Please.

Sinbad saw the viper-like ponytail tightening around an almost limp Husayn. Tears were brimming in his eyes because of the immense pain.

All right! It’s Sulaiman al-Tajir.

If a creature like that could smile, then maybe that was what the Qutrub did as it freakily pulled back its lipless mouth, baring its fangs in triumph. Thank you, Sulaiman al-Tajir.

The Qutrub studied the pentacle for a minute before hurling Husayn through the air towards Sinbad, who reached out and grabbed him. ‘Are you okay? Just lean against a tree and take deep breaths,’ Sinbad instructed.

‘I’m fine,’ Husayn replied, rubbing his fingers across the red marks that had appeared around his neck.

‘If it wasn’t for you, I would have killed him on the spot.’ Sinbad gritted his teeth, turning to the Qutrub. I’m sixteen years old. A kid like you.

What?

You had asked me my age.

The Qutrub sat on all fours—it almost looked like a dog, barring the cuteness and the furriness. It opened its mouth, revealing its fangs like a ferocious dog waiting to attack. Send me back.

You said you played a prank on your friend. You are a troublemaker, aren’tyou?

What? No. Who said that?

You love to trouble your mother. Sinbad walked around the pentacle, his thokcha sword shining in the darkness.

I love my mama.

And yet, you took so much effort to find me. You could have gone to any other Seid.

I didn’t find one here, the Qutrub said, jutting its lower lip and staring down at its feet as if it was being scolded by a teacher.

No. I think you liked living here until you started... missing her.

The Qutrub said, You do realize I can hurt your friend again by jumping out of this pentacle?

I know, I know. But I also know that you are lying. You wanted to be independent, far away from your mother, but once you managed to do that, you realized how much you miss her, even including all her fussing and the clean-your-room nagging. Am I right? The prank... The reason you got stuck here... was not a prank after all, was it? For someone who

knows so much about Seids and how they fool jinnis, I would say you are quite knowledgeable. A sharp mind, in fact. You are studious. And I know one more thing. Sinbad flashed a smile.

What? the Qutrub growled shakily.

The studious and intelligent ones don’t do ‘pranks’.

Fine. Fine! The Qutrub stood up and tried to pout, looking timid— if ever there was a timid-looking monstrous giant. You’re right. I did come here to do research on humans. I’m a researcher—there, you have it! And this was my project. But then I got stuck and I needed to go back. There was never a prank... It’s just my mama... She didn’t want me to leave the house. Ever! She feared that I’d get hurt.

Well, it’s a legitimate fear because you are a child, Sinbad started. I understand, Ghul. I do get what you went through. You can’t stay put and study forever. You know, I used to have the same—

Who is Ghul?

You. Your name.

The jinni shook his head and said earnestly, No. I am Zor... Suddenly, it paused. Its pitch-black eyes widened as its body began to tremble. No!

Sinbad smiled, unsheathing his sword.

You tricked me! You are going to pay for this! thundered Zor as it lurched to its feet, outside the pentacle. Its talons, like sharp-edged swords, reached for the ruffle-haired boy in the shabby white tunic.

‘Sinbad! Sinbad... my only friend...’ Husayn cried from behind as he watched the filthy monster launch itself in the air in the direction of his friend, only to be hurled back by an invisible force. ‘Wait, what?’

Wait, what happened? Zor cried, tangled in its own mess of bones.

Sinbad looked up coolly at the Qutrub, his fingers lightly tapping on the hilt of his thokcha sword. Researcher Jinni, you are standing on the double seal of Solomon that traps a jinni once its name has been revealed. Your name worked as an activation key.

‘Yes! Stay where you are, you big bully!’ Husayn, who was standing behind him, began clapping and jumping with excitement. Sinbad let out a small laugh. He knew Husayn couldn’t hear their telepathic conversations, but he could see that the jinni was trapped.

Release me, Sulaiman al-Tajir. I know your name and you have to do as you are bid by me.

Sulaiman who?

Sulaiman you.

Sinbad arched his brows. Um, that’s not my real name. That’s one of my many aliases.

The jinni shrieked in horror and punched and scratched the invisible shield around it.

‘Umm ... Sinbad. You need to kill him before the civilians get to know that there is a jinni here,’ Husayn chirped from behind.

‘You don’t say!’ Sinbad shook his head. He knew what he had to do—enter the circle.

Having understood the plan, Zor laughed menacingly. You’ll be making a mistake, Sulaiman or non-Sulaiman. You’ll be trapped with me, hunter.

Sinbad didn’t seem to hear it as he stepped inside the outer circle and his thokcha sword made from sky-iron bathed in gleaming silver light. No. You are making a mistake being here with me.

The Qutrub bared its fangs and launched towards him, almost flying within that little space, its long talons going straight for Sinbad’s neck when the boy casually somersaulted sideways. Old moves. Sinbad smiled. Zor growled loudly and stood up on its hind legs, straightening its spine as the red muscles heaved. It dashed towards Sinbad, who stood ready with his sword. As it lunged forward, Sinbad made only a slight movement of his foot and coolly hopped over to the other side, thus evading it. There was a faint whirring sound. Zor looked down, confused by the noise, and then at Sinbad.

A dark liquid dripped from the sword—it had been slashed.

The jinni howled as it looked up, his eyes darker than ever. It paced around the edges of the circle, grimacing in anger. Sinbad kept his eyes fixed on the creature and remained in the attack position. He recalled how Master Reis had taught him to use his sword. It had to be done like a graceful dancer, he’d always say. It is all about the feet rather than the blade... Sinbad smiled, lost in thought—and just then, without granting Sinbad even a second to react, the Qutrub struck his feet and flung him up into the air. Sinbad landed on his feet, but a surge of pain rose inside him as he felt his right foot twist at an awkward angle.

‘Sinbad!’ shrieked Husayn from outside the circle, stepping forward too close to the invisible shield.

Sinbad gestured him not to intervene and stay away. He saw the Qutrub grinning at him.

You had a thought. And I listened.

Sinbad lamented and realized that he had to be careful about not letting such thoughts cloud his mind—it helps the creature in knowing his weakness. He concentrated only on the blinding pain of his broken foot and cleared his mind.

Come on. Sinbad challenged.

The Qutrub, like a mad dog, rushed towards Sinbad, who tried to limp and evade. But Zor was way too angry and powerful this time. Sinbad felt the jinni's head hit his chest, pushing him right to the edge of the circle. Sinbad breathed hard, clutching his chest. If it wasn't for the tunic with the protective runes, he would have probably died after this attack. He stood where he was, for he knew any movement with a broken limb meant instant death, especially when it came to furious jinnis. Let's finish this now. It's gone on for too long.

The Qutrub laughed and launched an attack. But this time, Sinbad did not falter. As Zor lunged at him, leaping through the air, Sinbad plunged the thokcha sword deep into the Qutrub's chest in one swift stroke.

And suddenly, darkness enveloped everything and a thick black smoke hovered over the pentacle.

Sinbad immediately took off his topaz ring and like a Pied Piper, he managed to lead the clouds of smoke inside the ring. As the topaz ring consumed the spirit of the jinni, it glowed and shook in the darkness.

'What just happened?' Husayn asked, frantically rushing forward.

'I transported Zor's spirit and trapped it inside the stone after I killed its earthly body. I'll parcel it back to the guild,' Sinbad replied, tossing the uncontrollable ring in his rucksack. He fell back to the ground, exhausted,

his foot still hurting. ‘This was tough.’ He looked up at the clear sky and the stars—beautiful and shimmering. And for some reason, after

a long, long time, he felt that they were blinking only for him.

SEVEN

FOUR YEARS AGO

He believed that whenever the stars blinked, his parents were communicating with him.

He had vague memories of when this shred of hope had entered his mind. It probably happened when he had gone to Oman to hunt for vampires with Master Reis, and they had met an astrologer who had asked Sinbad about his lineage. Sinbad didn't have an answer, and so the astrologer had said: 'It is believed that after people die, they become stars. When the stars appear to blink, it means your loved ones are clapping for you, for what you have been doing on Earth. It's the only way they can tell you how proud they are of you.'

And till now, he hadn't witnessed many instances of blinking stars. Feeling morose, Sinbad lowered his head and then observed the villagers sitting around a warm fire, roasting a goose. Sinbad noticed the goose's skin slowly changing hues. Slowly, the image of the once robust goose was forgotten.

Commander Qasim was standing in a corner with Captain Abdul. The band of soldiers, on being summoned by Reis, were sitting in a huddle on several logs, holding shields and spears. It was time to strategize and launch their plan of action.

Clouds of mist consumed the eerie compound, and the only sign of life was the fire and the people around it. Wrapping a shawl tightly around himself, Sinbad looked at his master whose pale eyes shimmered against the firelight.

‘I am Master Reis, the Eldest Seid of the Ninurta Guild. For those who don’t know what I do, I slay the creatures of the other world. As you must know, these creatures have no origins, no history. They have been part of our world since time immemorial. Our Grand Master Al-Nuhrad decided to take action and with sorcerers across the world, he created spells a human can wield. He created the Path to becoming

a hunter. It’s tough and not many pass, but the ones who do, live and breathe to fight these creatures of the dark.’

He paused, blinking. All attention was on him.

‘I was summoned by your religious leader, the caliph of Arabia, Harun al-Rashid to stop this mayhem that caused devastation on this island. I have heard and seen enough. We face a very strong enemy—a giant bird that preys on us.’

One of the villagers among the crowd spoke up, ‘And we are making it easier for the bird if we continue to be outside. Let’s go in. The witch doctor’s pointless speech can happen in the morning.’

The crowd started talking in hushed voices.

‘It won’t,’ Reis said calmly.

‘Why?’ another villager asked.

‘I have drawn the sigil of Mikha’el, the angel of south winds, for our protection. Notice the overwhelming mist around us?’

A murmur ran through the crowd. They looked around in awe, whispering to each other.

‘It’s because of the sigil,’ added Reis, his mouth curved into an awkward grin. He picked up the spit on which the goose was being cooked and, without paying heed to the heat of the burning flames, grabbed the metal rod with his bare hands. Then he pulled off pieces of meat and stuffed them into his mouth. His palms, Sinbad observed, had burnt marks, but he

didn’t seem to be in any pain. ‘It makes us invisible in the dark. For a while, at least. We don’t have time. We need to act now.’

‘What can we do, sir?’ asked a woman in the crowd.

‘I heard rumours about a feral child.’

Dead silence.

Sinbad looked around and saw that some had grown pale.

Reis continued, ‘Ah, you know what I speak of. The child, Safeena Umair, was a resident of your village before she was ostracized for being the Devil’s daughter, and now she takes revenge through this gigantic creature. Isn’t that true?’

No one answered.

Qasim intervened, ‘I don’t suppose you actually believe it’s the girl, Master Reis. I mean—’

‘She does have some involvement,’ the Seid interrupted, chewing the meat. ‘I don’t know if she is evil or not. But

I want to know more about her. And I can only do that with your help.’

The villagers watched with rapt attention. ‘How can we help?’ Reis turned to the Jews. ‘Is there a rabbi among you?’ One of them raised his hand. He had brown eyes, sharp like the bark of an aged tree.

‘What’s your name, sir?’ Reis asked softly.

‘Ishmael,’ said the rabbi.

‘Will you help me?’

‘Anything to stop this madness, my good sir,’ the rabbi replied earnestly. His beard was tied with beads. ‘I came here to pray for a child

who was suffering from fever. She recovered, but I could never leave the village.'

'Good.' Reis stood up, gulping down the last of the goose and flung the metal rod on the ground. 'To know about this Safeena, I will need Rabbi Ishmael's help.'

'But how would he get us the information about the girl?' asked Captain Abdul, slightly confused. 'He hasn't even met her. We should ask the midwife.'

Reis shook his head. 'She's old and she's of no use, otherwise she would have already divulged useful information.'

The crowd nodded their heads.

'How can I be of service, my good sir?' asked Ishmael.

Reis walked over to the rabbi and patted him on the shoulder as the crowd watched them intently. 'Have you ever performed an exorcism?'

'Of course!' exclaimed the rabbi.

'Interesting. Do you know what adorcism is?'

The rabbi's brows furrowed. 'I... uh ...'

'Exorcism is when you purge a demon or spirit from a human body. Adorcism is when you invite them inside,' Reis explained, sending a chill down everyone's bones—Sinbad's visibly so. He had studied about adorcism and it seemed like an agonizing practice.

Before Reis could continue, they heard the squawking of the giant bird in the distance. It was a screeching cry, as if it had not eaten in days. The direction of the winds changed. A collective flutter of fear swept the crowd as they shifted uneasily and whispered among themselves. A look of horror flashed across their faces. 'My dear friend Ishmael,' Reis said, ignoring the loud squawking, 'we don't have time. I want your permission to perform adorcism on you.'

‘You want... a... a demon inside of me?’ Ishmael’s voice wavered. ‘Why?’

Sinbad closed his eyes. He knew what Master Reis was up to and what kind of a demon he would be calling since he chose a Jew rabbi, a perfect vessel for a demon from the Jewish folklore. And he didn’t like his idea at all. He knew it would only have drastic consequences.

‘Yes,’ Reis said with a warm smile and kind, soft eyes. ‘Because only that demon can tell me who Safeena Umair really is and what her connection is to this giant bird.’

And then Sinbad saw his master lie through his teeth with the most feigned sincerity when he said the following words: ‘I promise you, you’ll be safe.’

EIGHT

PRESENT DAY

A Seid lies. He lies for the greater good.

Sinbad knew this. It was one of the first few lessons taught by Master Reis.

I miss him.

Sinbad sighed and splashed water on his face. His eye caught his reflection in the shards of the mirror. He had tight, strong muscles with sharp scars across his body. His bare chest felt thick and heavy, and in the centre was a burnt patch in the shape of a falcon sigil. It was the symbol of the Mesopotamian god Ninurta who Al-Nuhrad, the first Seid, followed. Every apprentice who joined the guild wore this symbol. Sinbad ran his fingers across the patch and the painful memory of the burns hurt every inch of him.

It was late evening and the moon loomed over the mortals, shining its bright light that peeked through the open windows.

‘Sinbad! What the heck are you doing inside? People are waiting for their orders!’ cried Mehmood, the tavern owner, as he knocked vigorously on the door. Sinbad quickly pulled on his tunic and staggered out of the loo. His feet still hurt, but he put on a happy face so he could face Mehmood. Standing at the door, Mehmood’s pointed nose and the big hat, which he always wore and hid half of his face, came into view.

‘You vanished last night and now you are hiding in the blasted loo. What is all this about, boy?’ He looked down. ‘Oh dear, are you hurt? Bandaged it all up?’

‘Yes, sir.’ Sinbad put on a brave smile.

‘Will you be able to serve fast?’ Mehmood asked, concerned.

‘As long as the officers don’t come barging in for bribes, I shall do my duty,’ Sinbad said as he walked towards the small kitchen corridor of the tavern.

Taverns were disguised as inns in Basra since ales and wines were considered impure by the caliphate. But people relished world-famous wine, which was made from fresh grapes that were grown in the local port of Basra and imported to Turkey, Russia and Egypt. And so, the tavern business was alive and kicking. Plates of sumptuous roasts of all kinds of meat lined the kitchen table. Little did the tavern customers know that the chef was a thirteen-year-old Chinese girl. She walked swiftly past Sinbad.

‘Hey you!’ shouted Pressa. ‘Where you at, boy?’

Sinbad slightly turned towards her. Her hair was styled in a bob cut and she had a petite frame, but the way she cooked with such dexterity and rhythm was truly impressive. If only she could be given weapons, Sinbad thought, she would do wonders. But he quickly admonished himself for even connecting his dangerous double life with this place.

‘Umm, I was just getting prepared for the night.’

‘Get busy busy then, boy!’ she shrieked. ‘I need to talk to you about something as well, ya.’

Sinbad raised a brow. ‘What is it about?’

‘You’ll know.’ Her face was expressionless. She stood atop a wooden stool while cooking. The commis chefs scrambled around the kitchen as she shouted at them: ‘What are you doing?’ ‘This is wrong.’ ‘Slice the onions

thinly or I will make a new dish out of you and feed your friends, do you understand, you lazy fool?'

Sinbad sniggered. He didn't know much about Pressa but that she was a Chinese immigrant and her real name was Peizhi Xiaoping, but she liked being called Pressa for some reason. And she was real good with insults.

Sinbad stepped out of the kitchen and walked into the main hall of the tavern. It was dimly lit with many candles affixed to the walls. The wooden benches and tables were filled with people from all walks of life—be it dhimmis, soldiers or civilians, everyone was having a great time. In one corner sat Husayn, playing an oud and singing this song:

0, there was a great warrior

Just and true

Fought evil and jinnis

Brought harmony

To not just a few

He was the hero

That no one knew

And yet he did What he did

For the people

Who showed no gratitude

Only attitude

Sinbad shook his head and Husayn winked at him. Husayn couldn't forget the day he learnt about his friend's double life—the day he had been

feverish and terribly sick and had been told that he had a diseased wraith stuck to him like a shadow.

Sinbad had pulled him out of this situation and fought the spirit in his room where Husayn lay unconscious. Later, when the battle was over, Sinbad realized that Husayn was conscious and wide awake, only a whole lot scared. When the shamans had come in with Mehmood and asked what had happened, Sinbad had halfexpected Husayn to reveal his identity to the others, but instead, Husayn told them that Sinbad had given him some herbs and read him a story. From that day on, Husayn really respected Sinbad for what he did and who he was. And in turn, Sinbad knew he could trust this Persian.

With a plate in his hand, he went around the tables, taking orders and chatting with the Englishmen, the French and the Indians. Since Basra was considered to be at the mouth of Arabia, foreigners from all over the world frequented the place as tourists or traders. And so, they came under the category of dhimmis.

The night wore on and thanks to the numerous trips between the kitchen and the main hall, beads of sweat started trickling down Sinbad's forehead. Husayn's loud music playing in the background combined with Pressa's non-stop instructions gave way to visible exhaustion on Sinbad's face and his shoulders sagged. And it would have been like any other night if he hadn't overheard this conversation:

'Did ya hear about what happened in Baghdad?' a man said.

'What?'

'The caliph is stressed out. It seems that a huge attack happened recently. Some white-haired men broke into the House of Wisdom.'

Sinbad knew which place this man was talking about.

It was the most well-known library in the world—home to texts and scrolls from across the seven seas.

But the white-haired men...

He had heard about them too. A slight shiver went down his spine. I hope it's not who I think it is.

‘Ransacked, they say. The biggest robbery ever,’ one of the men said while Sinbad picked up the dirty dishes and cleared the tables. ‘And the funny part is, not one book was stolen. What a wicked thing to do, isn’t it?’

Sinbad shook his head. Tavern gossip was always exaggerated and Sinbad knew this. So he went on his way, taking the plates and mugs back to the kitchen. Just then, he heard a loud slam as the door behind him burst open. Sinbad turned around to find coast guard officers entering the tavern. Everyone froze. Some spilled their wine on the floor so they wouldn’t be caught, others emptied theirs by chugging it down.

Dressed in long blue tunics with thick metal baldrics, the officers walked towards the centre of the hall, keenly eyeing the sailors and the traders.

Mehmood hastily entered and said, ‘What can I do for you, officers? I believe we’ve already had the pleasure of meeting each other this month regarding the you-know-what.’ He added with a jolly grin, ‘How can I help you otherwise? There’s special seating in the back for you. You want me to escort you there?’

‘No matter to discuss with you, Mehmood. We seek Husayn Ahmed,’ one of the officers said in a stern voice.

The music stopped.

Sinbad eyed Husayn, whose fingers had been trembling so badly he couldn’t even hold the oud properly and his blue eyes had widened with fright.

What has he done now?

‘Husayn? My musician? What has he done to the coast guard, might I inquire?’

Everyone was quiet. Sinbad scuttled towards Husayn’s corner. ‘What did you do?’ he asked through clenched teeth.

‘He stole a corpse that we found on the shore,’ the officer said to Mehmood. ‘We inquired at the burial ground and the gravedigger told us about a boy with curly hair and blue eyes. We did some more investigating and they directed us here, as the only boy with blue eyes is the musician who works here.’

Mehmood gave Husayn a scornful look.

Taking the hint, the officers walked towards Husayn. They immediately snatched away his instrument and grabbed his arm. Sinbad protested and tried to reason with them, but they pushed him aside.

‘Leave Aphrodite at least,’ cried Husayn.

The officer arched his brows. ‘Who’s Aphrodite?’

‘My instrument. Please give it to my friend, Sinbad, over here.’

Sinbad had always felt that it was materialistic and childish to give a name, and that too such a foreign one like Aphrodite, to an object. But hey, he was no one to judge.

The officer sniggered and handed it to Sinbad, who just about managed to hold it along with the plates and mugs he had been

carrying for so long. As they made Husayn stagger across the room, pushing and shoving him, Sinbad began concocting escape strategies for Husayn. But he felt bile stuck in his throat. It was guilt. ‘All right, it was me.’

The officers and Husayn turned back. ‘What?’

‘What?’ Husayn glowered at Sinbad, indicating him to stop talking.

‘I told him to steal the corpse,’ Sinbad said, sighing. He put down the plates and mugs on the side table along with Aphrodite. ‘It’s my fault. He’s just an idiot who listened to me.’

‘Then you shall be punished as well,’ one of the coast guard officers said, stepping forward to grab him.

‘As well? But I just said he—’ Sinbad began but saw the disappointed look on Mehmood’s face. He then noticed the puzzled glances of the customers in the hall who seemed to be wondering why two kids would rob graves.

‘Well then,’ the officer said in disgust, ‘off you both go behind the bars.’

It was a few hours past midnight. Sinbad leant his back against the wall while Husayn clutched the iron grilles of the prison. It was a small station belonging to the naval guard of the empire. Basra wasn’t really known for handing out strict punishments, but when a corpse is found in the middle of the beach, it’s probably bad news.

‘You shouldn’t have done it, you know,’ Husayn said without turning to look at Sinbad.

‘I had to. I know it’s my fault. Don’t worry,’ Sinbad said, forgetting what Master Reis had told him. Lie to gain the greater good. Lie so that others own up to your mistakes, but never put the blame on yourself. A Seid is too important to be punished.

But Sinbad didn’t agree with that. He believed in honesty and helping out his friends—something Master Reis should have taught him.

‘What are they gonna do to us?’ Husayn asked meekly.

‘I see no one in the vicinity.’

Sinbad peered about the room and the spot where an officer should have been seated, but there was no one. Apparently, someone important was visiting and all of them had scurried outside to greet him.

‘They should probably spank you like the whining child that you are,’ Sinbad replied, shrugging. Then he added, ‘I’ve been here enough times, so when I say don’t worry...

don’t worry.’

‘What if they execute us?’ Husayn chose to pay no heed to the insult.

Sinbad laughed out loud at the innocence of his friend. ‘Not for such a simple crime.’

‘I don’t know about “simple”, now that I think about it. What if they do? I’ve seen some executions, Sinbad.’ Husayn turned. He looked as pale as a ghost. ‘They put you on a rock and then they smash your head with another rock, like dealing with a couple of apricots. It’s not pretty, you know.’

‘Executions aren’t supposed to be pretty, Husayn,’ Sinbad said.

Husayn grimaced. But before he could say anything more, they heard loud footsteps.

Sinbad inched forward to see who was entering the room. He expected a guard, but it was a lanky man with a long face, narrow eyes and a thin moustache. Heavy gold earrings dangled from his drooping ears. Looking at the multicoloured, ruby-studded gown he was wearing, Sinbad realized that he was someone important, someone regal. Perhaps the same person the officers had gone to meet outside. But strangely, no one had escorted him to their cell.

Perhaps ... this man wanted it to be that way. A discreet conversation.

‘Hello,’ said the man, ‘I would like to speak to Sinbad.’

Sinbad didn’t say anything. He froze momentarily.

‘I’m Sinbad,’ Husayn replied. ‘What do you want, you flamboyant mosquito?’

Sinbad almost choked. That was the strangest insult he had ever heard. Husayn needs to take lessons from Pressa, Sinbad thought.

‘I would like to speak to Sinbad,’ the man repeated, this time angling towards Sinbad.

Sinbad patted a reluctant Husayn on the shoulder to step back as he stepped closer to the grille, inches away from the man. ‘What do you want?’

‘I, in particular, don’t want anything. I’m just a humble envoy— Ja’far from the Barkamid house, vizier to the caliph. It’s the ruler of this nation who needs your assistance.’

‘The caliph?’ Sinbad raised his brows.

‘Yes.’

‘And what kind of help does he need?’ Sinbad asked, growing wearisome by his thick, unsettling pauses.

Ja’far glanced at Sinbad’s chest and, through thin slits, saw a portion of the burnt patch—his falcon sigil. Sinbad immediately adjusted his tunic and looked straight at the vizier.

He knows who I am. But how?

‘The caliph,’ he began after the silence had gone on too long, ‘wants you to save the world. And you, unfortunately, have only seven days to do that.’

NINE

FOUR YEARS AGO

Sinbad tied him to the bed.

His heartbeat raced as he knew he was participating in something wrong. He could feel it. The room was dark and kept aglow by beeswax candles alone that were next to the bed. The door and the windows were shut. Master Reis had asked the commander for the most isolated shack in the compound.

Ishmael had been stripped down to his drawers. Lying down on the bed, he shivered but kept a brave face. When he had agreed to do this, the villagers had hugged him, feeling indebted to him. It was this moral support that had helped Ishmael in deciding to get on this bed and be ready to be the vessel of the damned. He is a good man, Sinbad thought and let out a sigh.

Standing at the edge of the bed, Master Reis was facing Ishmael, holding a book in his hand—the book of adorcism. ‘Have you tied him well, boy?’ he asked Sinbad.

Sinbad once again checked the four corners of the bed to which Ishmael’s hands and legs had been tied.

‘And the door is locked?

Sinbad nodded.

‘Now, Rabbi Ishmael,’ began Master Reis, ‘do not fret if you feel you are losing consciousness. That means, your soul is leaving your body and

the spirit is entering.’

Ishmael nodded frantically. ‘Wh-what kind of demon is it?’

‘An Ibbur. Unlike its counterpart Dybbuks, they are quite docile and helpful.’

‘What would you ask it about the girl?’

‘That shouldn’t be your concern. Just take a deep breath and relax and you’ll be fine in no time.’

‘Can I... can I...’ Ishmael struggled, his voice shaking, ‘have some water?’

‘Of course, Rabbi Ishmael. Boy!’ He looked at Sinbad who quickly grabbed a jug and helped Ishmael by putting the glass to his lips. Some of the water spilled over the side of his mouth and Sinbad wiped it off.

‘Will I be fine?’ he whispered, panic in his voice.

Sinbad was stumped; he had never seen so much fear in anyone’s eyes.

‘Are you done, boy?’ Master Reis called out. ‘If you are, go to the corner and watch.’

Sinbad did so, standing away from the bed. He has been part of exorcisms, but not an adorcism. And that was scary, for it meant welcoming a dangerous spirit. And spirits, as he had learnt, were very unpredictable.

Master Reis began to chant in Hebrew. His accent was spot on. He was holding a bowl of holy water, and he sprinkled a few drops on Ishmael.

The rabbi kept shivering, whispering to himself, appearing to be on the verge of tears...

Until he stopped.

His body remained firm, frozen.

‘He’s gone into trance,’ Reis said.

Sinbad nodded to himself. Trance was a state of limbo, kind of a coma. Ishmael had left the vessel that lay on the bed. It was time to beckon the spirit inside it.

‘Now,’ Reis said and went towards Sinbad, ‘I want you to take my sword.’ He unsheathed the sword that dangled from his belt and gave it to him. ‘You know what it is, right?’

‘A thokcha sword made from the sky-iron reserves in Tibet,’ Sinbad responded, remembering that he had been taught this.

‘Yes, the sort of weapon that can mortally wound any otherworldly creature. You remember your sword lessons?’

‘Yes.’

‘If the Dybbuk does anything nasty—which they always tend to— kill it.’

‘Dybbuk?’ Sinbad looked up at his master, his eyes filled with fear. ‘But I thought we are summoning an Ibbur.’

Reis tightened his jaw. ‘Don’t be a fool. Ibburs are useless spirits that only know fun and games. If you want to chat about food and drinks and are interested in frolics, Ibburs are the spirits you should call. But if you want to ask about the Devil’s child, only a vicious kind of demon, a Dybbuk would be able to help you.’

Sinbad nodded. He didn’t like that Reis lied, but he remained silent, for he was his master.

‘Will you be able to strike the demon if it does something untoward?’ Reis asked again, demanding reassurance. ‘You do know that demons have a tendency of overstaying their welcome on Earth inside the vessels of the humans so that they can escape their mundane lives and their worlds?’

‘But then... will I have to kill Ishmael?’ Sinbad asked, worried.

‘He won’t be Ishmael any more if the Dybbuk takes control of him. We should put our best efforts towards not letting that happen.’

‘Why don’t you do the needful?’ Sinbad whispered.

‘Because I want you to take tough decisions, boy. You can’t just be a mute spectator. After I am gone, this sword will be yours. It’s the Seid tradition.’

Sinbad nodded. This was part of his training, he reminded himself. He took a deep breath and obeyed his master. He then placed the sword against the wall and stood in front of it so that the demon won’t be able to see it.

Master Reis picked up the book again and began reading from it. He chanted names and phrases until the candles began to flicker. The windows cracked and the door began to shake. The ground beneath them quaked.

Then came a loud cry.

From Ishmael’s mouth.

Sinbad bent forward slightly and saw a wicked smile on Ishmael’s face. His eyes had turned purple. Saliva dripped from his mouth and his body began convulsing, trying to wriggle out of the ropes.

‘Who calls me here?’ yelled Ishmael in a different, hungry, hoarse tone.

‘Identify yourself,’ Master Reis responded harshly.

‘Who calls me here!’

‘I’m Master Reis of the Ninurta Guild.’

‘Monster slayers?’ He cocked his head to one side. ‘What a welcoming sight it is.’

‘Identify yourself.’ Reis didn’t give in to having a conversation.

‘I’m Varzan from the land of Qliphoth,’ said the Dybbuk rather nicely. ‘How can I be of service?’

Reis responded, ‘You are going to help me, otherwise

I shall burn you with the blessed water.’

‘I know the routine. And I want to help.’

‘Why?’

‘Was tired of Qliphoth. It’s a pretty depressing place. This room, with the beeswax smell, mmhmmm... This is like a vacation. So, anything in return for giving me these fifty seconds of paradise.’

Reis wasn’t taken aback. Neither was Sinbad. Demons were often ... erratic.

‘I want to know about a girl. She’s called Safeena Umair.’

The Dybbuk’s expression changed from concern to malice as it tried to lean back as far as it could against the back of the bed with the limitations of being tied to all corners. ‘Interesting.’

‘Why?’ Reis asked.

‘How do you know about her?’

‘We came across one of her pets.’

‘She’s really a piece of work, isn’t she?’ the Dybbuk chuckled, but it came as a growl.

‘Is she the Devil’s child?’

‘Bah! She’s worse.’ It shook its head. ‘She’s the Devil’s ... weapon.’

A shiver ran down Sinbad’s spine.

‘We talk about her, you know, in Qliphoth. Rumour has it that the Lord of the Dawn or Shaitan or what you call him, the Devil, created her out of his limb. He cut off his limb and she grew from it. She was then given to mortals living on an isolated island, so she won’t be troubled by the likes of your guild and the other interfering mortals until she turned eighteen.’ It smirked. ‘But it seems that luck did not favour her—she stirred up trouble and she came under your purview. What a travesty of the Lord of the Dawn’s plans.’

The candles flickered rapidly. Heavy winds deepened the cracks in the windows, whistling through them. Unperturbed, Reis asked, ‘What are his plans?’

‘I’m just a vessel demon. I can’t even afford to have a mortal body on Earth, since you know a Dybbuk is like half a demon; it doesn’t even have its full body.’ It paused to see their reactions to its dark humour, but their expressions didn’t change for even a second. It finally relented and said, ‘I don’t know much, okay? In fact, this is all just hearsay. If you want to know the reality, talk to an archdemon. But alas, you can’t, for they are too strong to be bound or too impossible to be found.’

‘What will happen when she turns eighteen?’

‘Devil only knows, ask him.’ The Dybbuk shrugged and crawled back into bed, fluffing the pillow as if it was having a decadent adorcism. ‘Oh, and also your ropes ... They aren’t tied very well.’ An evil grin played at its lips. ‘So I’m thinking I should kill you two and escape from here to see this pretty world.’

Reis turned and looked angrily at Sinbad, who swallowed the lump of fear in his throat. And in that split second, the Dybbuk broke the ends of the bed to which the rope was tied and hurtled towards Reis with such extreme force that they both went crashing to the ground. The Dybbuk tried to claw Reis’s face, baring its mouth and frantically moving its hands and legs in the air.

‘Kill it, boy! Kill it!’ Reis yelled.

Standing in the corner of the room, Sinbad had been witnessing their fight and, as soon as he heard his master’s cry, he turned around and picked up the sword. It seemed heavier all of a sudden. He walked towards the Dybbuk, whose tough arms were pinning down Reis’s to the ground. The Dybbuk had the upper hand but also its back against Sinbad. Breathing hard, Sinbad lifted up the sword to strike when... the Dybbuk turned its head and looked up. Its eyes were not purple any more. Instead of the tough demon, the terrified face of Ishmael appeared. ‘No, my child, please don’t.’

Sinbad stopped. His heart took a leap.

It’s using Ishmael to make me not hurt it.

‘Gods be kind,’ Reis yelled and spat at the Dybbuk. Suddenly, the Dybbuk’s form began to burn and lose control. It tossed and turned, its chest heaving and it screaming with pain. Reis reached for the book that had fallen to his side. He knelt down and started chanting the exorcism spell loudly in Hebrew until the winds howled and all of a sudden died down.

It was over.

Reis got to his feet. ‘I drank some spitfire as backup,’ he referred to the demon-repellent potion, ‘in case you were cowardly enough not to wield the blade.’ He shook his head and swiftly snatched the thokcha sword from Sinbad, pushing him back. ‘You are weak, boy. You disappoint me.’

Sinbad felt a pang of guilt... for listening to his heart, for being compassionate, for how he was.

He looked at old and despondent Ishmael who remained still. Lifeless.

‘He died.’ Reis lowered his head.

Sinbad wasn’t surprised. This is what he’d been dreading. He knew that almost 90 per cent of the time when a demon possessed a human, it took the human spirit with it when it left the vessel. Like now.

Sinbad walked up to Ishmael and closed his eyes as Reis opened the room's door. He gently touched the rabbi's forehead briefly.

Sinbad grabbed all their belongings and rushed out. He found the villagers gathered outside the shack waiting to hear what had transpired. It was early morning—a day had passed since Sinbad had been inside.

Reis said, 'I now know the important stuff, the stuff that matters, but this knowledge came at a cost.' There was such sincere grief in his master's voice that Sinbad felt his heart clench. He closed his eyes.

'Ishmael has sacrificed himself for the good of this society. When the demon left, he took Ishmael with him as well.'

The people gasped. A murmur flew through the crowd.

Commander Qasim, who was standing in the middle of the throng, came forward. 'Allah bless his soul.' He paused and then asked Reis, 'What is ... what is the news about the girl? Did you find out anything about her?'

And then, Sinbad heard the vilest lie, and he never understood why it was even said: 'Yes,' Master Reis responded, 'apparently, the girl is harmless and is not related to the creature in any way.'

TEN

PRESENT DAY

‘What I’m about to tell you will put the fear of death in you,’ said the vizier.

‘How did you find me?’ Sinbad asked, ignoring his warning.

They were in an officer’s room, which was illuminated by a lamp. It was a pretty small, damp place for a coast guard officer to be in. But this was the only option for now—as it was discreet and isolated from the rest of the prison.

Ja’far leant forward, his eyebrows tilted upwards. ‘The guild informed me about your presence in this shanty town of Basra. Unlikely for a Seid to be here.’

Sinbad cursed quietly. ‘I’ll tell you what I told the guild—

I came here because there are jinnis in abundance and I hunt them when they make a nuisance of themselves. I also deal with the spirits that the foreigners bring in.’ He lied, at least partially. There were demons but not many. Though he had come here to escape the humdrum Seid life and enjoy a mortal life, a normal life.

Since he would have had to justify this to the guild, he made up stories.

Once you become a Seid, you cannot go back, Master Reis had once said.

But Sinbad thought he could hide and at least pretend to have a normal life. And only embrace the monster-hunter lifestyle when absolutely necessary.

‘All right. If that’s how you operate.’Ja’far shrugged and his golden earrings swayed. ‘Anyhow, I came here hoping to find you at the tavern, but learnt that you are in the prison for a minute offence of grave robbing.’

‘I was catching a Qutrub,’ Sinbad spoke, agitated, thinking of Husayn who was back in the prison cell.

‘I see,’Ja’far said, displaying no emotion. ‘Since you are an asset to this empire, your charges will be dropped.’

‘I am yet to be an asset to this empire,’ Sinbad corrected him. ‘I have not yet accepted your contract. I need more information about this saving-the-world job.’

Ja’far craned his neck and studied the boy. ‘Indeed. Very well.’ He took out a stack of documents from his satchel and showed him a picture of a large trumpet that was decorated with runes. ‘Do you know what this is?’

‘The trumpet of Israfil,’ Sinbad said quickly. Master Reis had taught this to him in his Hebrew classes.

‘It was given to us by none other than Al-Nuhrad, and we had it for the longest time,’Ja’far said. For Sinbad, Al-Nuhrad was like any other historical figure, so he did not feel awestricken. Ja’far continued, ‘A long time ago, when he fought Iblis, the Lord of the Dawn, who had ventured out of Qliphoth, his demon kingdom, Al-Nuhrad was defeated. And the only reason was that Iblis’s brother, known as the Beast, was supporting him. Then in the utmost darkness, Mal’ak Israfil paid a visit to Al-Nuhrad.’

Mala’ika are angels, Sinbad recalled.

Ja’far remained still and his eyes didn’t leave the boy. He added, ‘Israfil was the Mal’ak of music, and so, he gave Al-Nuhrad this trumpet. If blown, the trumpet could lead to the defeat of the Beast, for it would make

him eternally asleep. And Al-Nuhrad blew it, causing the Beast to drown in his dreams and bury himself in an unknown location. Seeing the Beast defeated, Iblis returned to Qliphoth and has been there ever since. On his deathbed, Al-Nuhrad gave the guild and the caliphate the responsibility of protecting this trumpet, in case the need to use it ever arose again. We kept it secured inside the House of Wisdom until three days ago, someone stole it from us.'

Sinbad sat up as his mind veered back to the gossip he had heard about the loot at the tavern. 'By any chance, were there any Seids protecting the trumpet?'

'Of course. Most of them died. The one who survived said that there were some white-haired Nephilim who had come for the trumpet. But they couldn't do much harm as the Seids knew how to defeat them. The problem arose when she came.'

'Who?'

'You-know-who.' For the first time, Ja'far spoke sternly to him.

Sinbad felt a punch to the gut. 'I see. Why did they want the very weapon that has harmed their god?' He referred to the Nephilim, half-angels and half-humans, ostracized from the skies but harboured by Iblis in Qliphoth and brainwashed into fighting for his cause.

'We think, the guild and the ministers and even the caliph, that. .. well... they are planning to raise the Beast again, and they don't want this kind of weapon to be around the mortals when he's here.'

'So you want me to steal the trumpet back?'

'And give it to us,'Ja'far said as he nodded and handed him the documents, like an efficient bureaucratic officer.

Sinbad noticed the document on the top had the falcon sigil on it. And it was signed by Grand Master Nasir.

‘The grand master’s order,’ he said quickly as he handed him a scroll, ‘and the caliph’s written notice. These are all official notices for you to do right by your nation—and if you don’t, you will be tried for treason.’

Sinbad sniggered and held the papers. ‘What a way to daunt me with so much official paperwork,’ he scoffed. He didn’t give two hoots.

But he did care about her.

‘Why me? There are experienced Seids out there,’ Sinbad looked Ja’far in the eye.

‘But she trusts you,’Ja’far said, his nostrils flaring. ‘After all, you did quite a few stunts for her back then. If the guild wasn’t so apologetic and the caliph not so forgiving, you would have been executed for what you had done three years ago.’

Sinbad breathed deeply. He didn’t want to think about that time. He had done pretty questionable things that had led him to be stuck at the guild’s temple for almost six months, so he could redeem himself and repent the sins he had committed—even though he felt his acts had been just and fair.

‘You said the world will end in seven days?’ Sinbad said softly. ‘What’s the deal with that?’

‘It is Zarqa’ al Yamama’s prophecy. And ten, to be precise. But three days have been lost in all the travelling and decisionmaking.’

Sinbad knew about Zarqa; she was a soothsayer and a very powerful seer at that. She had crystal blue eyes, like sapphires or the clearest water in the world. When she gets a premonition, they sparkle.

‘What did she say?’

‘The world shall end in seven days when the trumpet of Israfil will be blown,’Ja’far said, his voice shaking. ‘Nothing more. Nothing less. But as

you know, prophecies change if circumstances change. And you shall do that by getting the trumpet back to us.'

Sinbad clenched his jaw. 'Fine. I'll do it. You haven't really given me much choice.'

'Good.' A thin smile came to Ja'far's face. 'Ah, and also... one of the guild's senior Seid will join you in your investigation.' With that, he hastily gathered the papers and stood up. 'The name is Idris.'

'No.'

'What?'

'I don't need an overseer.'

'Who says?'Ja'far rolled his eyes. 'Oh please, Sinbad, you are only sixteen years old. You have passed the Path and you are a full hunter—that's a given—but you aren't experienced. Idris is. So, Idris has been especially appointed by the grand master to accompany you.'

'A babysitter,' Sinbad said.

'Call it what you want,'Ja'far replied, walking towards the door. 'And Sinbad,' he said and turned around, 'I hope you do realize the gravity of this mission. The responsibility of the entire world is on your shoulders.'

'Zarqa has often been wrong.'

'We don't want to take any risks,'Ja'far said in an official tone.

Sinbad smirked. 'I'm sure the caliph would be protectionproofing his place.' He knew that he had the guild in his pocket and they would be casting protection spells across his empire, starting with his palace.

Ja'far was about to leave when Sinbad said, 'Wait.'

Sinbad didn't turn. He sat still, his arms wrapped across his chest. 'I... uh... How did she look?'

‘Who?’

‘Safeena Umair, the girl who stole the trumpet.’

‘The surviving Seid described her as “dangerous and lethal”.’

Sinbad remained silent.

Then before leaving, Ja’far concluded, ‘Though the caliph would appreciate if, when you bring the trumpet back, her head would come along with it as well.’

ELEVEN

FOUR YEARS AGO

‘What are we doing?’ Sinbad asked.

‘You’ll know,’ Master Reis responded glumly.

The light of dawn was overwhelmingly omnipresent with the sun’s orange blaze peeking through.

And so, Reis prepared.

Sinbad was assisting his master by bringing him different liquids from the rucksack. He noticed that Reis mixed sliced lemon and vinegar to create a paste.

While Reis did his job silently, Sinbad looked around the dull shack they had been stationed in, thanks to the commander. There were two cots to sleep in and the bare necessities. After the ordeal of Ishmael, Reis hadn’t slept, but Sinbad had taken a short nap. The whimpering face of the rabbi had been haunting him.

‘Get the scrying mirror.’

Sinbad took it out from the rucksack and carefully held it. Made of a rare, magical glass, it was quite delicate and was used for looking into future paranormal or supernatural events.

‘Why did you lie, master?’ Sinbad asked meekly, looking up at the towering figure of his sullen master. ‘About her. She is connected to the

Lord of the Dawn.’

‘I don’t have to explain myself to a ten-year-old, a disappointment.’ Reis glanced at Sinbad sharply before handing him a walnut-shaped bowl. ‘Slather this paste on your clothes and chest. I’ll do it after you.’

‘What is it?’

‘It makes us odourless,’ Reis replied.

Sinbad took the bowl and saw the greenish paste that smelled funky. ‘But... why do we need this?’

Reis spat out angrily, ‘Because we are going out of this compound to find this blasted bird... and kill it.’

As he stepped out of the compound, Sinbad could feel the tension rising inside him. He remained frozen as Master Reis walked ahead of him, strolling casually through the forest.

How can he be so fearless?

Sinbad appreciated this quality of his master. He was rude, heartless, a liar, a deceiver, but he was a brave man. Back at the guild, all the apprentices envied Sinbad, for he was chosen by Master Reis, one of the strongest hunters to have ever lived.

Perhaps he’s trying to toughen me.

Sinbad ambled after the man through a foggy haze. His eyes shot up to the vines where monkeys sat and stared back at him. A flock of seagulls hovered over them. The smell of turnips and roses and the roar of jaguars

hung in the air. As he went deeper, he realized the island was bigger than expected.

And that made his apprehension a reality. Sinbad noticed he was walking towards the hills that stood high, elevating from the thick canopies that pervaded the ground.

‘What we are dealing with is a gigantic bird like Garuda from Hindu mythology or Simurg from Persian mythology,’ Reis explained. ‘And the one thing I know about birds is that they make nests on mountains.’

Sinbad nodded, looking around. As they left the forest, Sinbad could see beautiful magnolia-lined valleys. This was the most exquisite place on the island. And before he could gawk at the scenery...

He heard it.

The loud squawk!

Reis grabbed hold of Sinbad and pushed him into the bushes, while he pulled out his sword. Sinbad could hear the flapping of the enormous wings; the thunderous sound reminded him of rain clouds. The tulips shivered in the wind. He was afraid to look up, but he tilted his head slightly and there it was—the massive bald bird gliding over them. Its quills were twelve paces long and as thick in proportion. The talons looked big enough to hold elephants with ease. And the feathers were deep brown, almost almond in colour. If it weren’t so life-threatening, it was actually a pretty beautiful creature to look at.

But I don’t want to be alone with this thing hovering over my head, Sinbad thought as he admired the wild creature. And he was glad at this moment that Master Reis was with him. The bird flapped its wings, overlooking the diminutive humans as it glided towards the hills.

‘It’s going back to its nest,’ Reis whispered, ‘because it’s sunrise.’ He continued with feverish delight, ‘Though there’s nothing supernatural about it, other than its size. Strange.’

Sinbad didn’t like his master’s tone, for it was seemingly heading into dangerous territory. He looked at the bird that was flying towards the mistiness that engulfed the hills and then disappeared from sight. It was a moment of pure beauty and intrigue.

‘We need to go towards the hills,’ said Reis as he began to walk, and Sinbad followed him. After the tulip trees, they were met with delicate cherry blossoms and peculiar rainbow-coloured vines that they had never seen before. Reis was too driven by his mission to halt and admire his surroundings. He was trying to find the lane that would take them towards the hills.

‘Master?’

No response.

‘Master?’

‘What?’ Reis looked back.

‘Look around you.’

Reis did.

And so did Sinbad through his scrying mirror. The entire land was lush with colour. The canopies bore brown apricots and the flowers were decked in various hues. It was magical.

‘What is ...’ Reis murmured under his breath.

‘It’s very... unreal, as if untouched by humans,’ Sinbad said while noticing the clean leaves everywhere. The place smelled of lavender. There was no ghoulish stench here unlike the rest of the island. It was strangely peaceful. ‘Why didn’t the islanders know about this place?’

‘Because whoever is making this happen, doesn’t want this to be seen. If it weren’t for our scrying mirror, we wouldn’t have either.’

Loud squawks were heard coming from the hills. But they were distant, unthreatening—at least for now.

They continued walking towards the hills and deep inside the forest till they found a large goat with deer antlers on its head. The goat was grazing on grass that had silver blades. Suddenly, Reis sprinted towards the animal, who then looked up and immediately ran in the other direction. Sinbad did too, a smile crossing his face. He was ecstatic to see such beauty in nature—something he had never witnessed before. As they moved down the forested slopes and walked between olive trees, Sinbad saw the goat going towards an oak wood cottage, which was surrounded by several bizarre, multicoloured plants. There were some groves beyond the cottage.

‘Someone other than the islanders lives here,’ Reis said with a slow chuckle. Sinbad knew that chuckle—the sort that came out as aha!

They saw the goat with the deer antlers meeting a woman who had red hair as thick as a bush tied in a bun. She was kneeling down and tending to the goat as if talking to it. All of a sudden, her eyes shot up and she saw Sinbad and Reis.

Instantly, her irises turned deadly, looking almost apprehensive.

‘That’s what I thought.’ Master Reis smiled to himself.

‘What?’ Sinbad managed to utter.

‘Sinbad,’ Reis looked down at him, ‘this island has a witch. And she’s not happy that we now know about her.’

TWELVE

PRESENT DAY

They were standing right in the middle of the main hall of the tavern, which was empty since it was daytime and no one barges into a tavern at this time. Sinbad and Husayn stood there, waiting for a reprimand from Mehmood, who seemed ready to explode.

Sinbad kept his head low and so did Husayn.

The veins on Mehmood's forehead were popping out.

'I don't even...' he began as he adjusted his big hat furiously.

'Hold on, hold on.' Husayn smiled cleverly and made Mehmood sit down and gave Sinbad a lopsided smirk. 'My dear sir, it was just a misunderstanding. The officers apologized to us. To us! Hah! Can you believe it? They said they thought it was me and him but turned out it wasn't.'

Mehmood looked at Sinbad suspiciously for assurance, who on cue nodded comically, suppressing his laughter. 'Why did you say then that you were involved too?'

'Because he's a dramatic buffoon. He didn't know what it was about, but he always stands by his friends—which also includes you —' Husayn said, patting Mehmood on the shoulder, 'even if he is not involved in the situation in any sort of way.'

Sinbad liked Husayn's quick-wittedness. Back when Sinbad was in the room with Ja'far, he had told him to pardon Husayn's sentence as well.

Ja’far had refused at first using jargon, but eventually agreed after Sinbad explained how Husayn was a wizard ... of sorts.

Well, he clearly is one. The wizard of words.

‘Why don’t I want to believe you?’ Mehmood asked Husayn warily.

‘Because we live in a world of preconceived notions and prejudices! Look at us,’ he said, waving his hands towards Sinbad and himself, ‘We are two naturally impish-looking... handsome boys, I’ll give you that. And so, the officers assumed that we were involved in the body stealing. The police and their processes, I tell you!’ Husayn shook his head, sighing loudly. He then flashed an innocent look.

Immersed in thought, Mehmood shook his head.

‘This basically means that they realized their mistake later and agreed to let us go. There’s no other reasoning for this.’

‘There isn’t, but...’ Mehmood trailed off, trying to remember any clues that might help him turn the tables, but Husayn didn’t give him the opportunity.

Husayn grinned cheekily and said, ‘So now don’t worry. Go inside and rest. We will mop the floor and clean the dishes and take care of everything else. All right?’ Mehmood nodded absentmindedly.

As he departed, Husayn breathed a sigh of relief. Suddenly, Mehmood turned around and said, ‘It’s just that... you are like my children, boys. Don’t mess things up. I am glad this was just a misunderstanding, but what if one day it isn’t? You know about my children... how they were separated from me.’ He lowered his gaze as Sinbad recalled talking to Husayn about how after Mehmood’s wife’s death, her brother took the kids away for illegal trade and to make money. ‘I don’t want you two to get in trouble.

Especially you, Husayn. Sinbad can take care of himself, but you... you have a name to live up to.’

Husayn’s cheeky demeanour instantly changed.

‘Your father was in the army, a cavalryman who fought in the Battle of the Zab for this empire. Don’t disappoint him.’

‘He won’t be disappointed. He’s dead.’ Husayn replied, but Sinbad could see that he was annoyed at the mention of his martyred father. Husayn never talked about him, the only parent he had since his mother died of a natural illness a long time ago.

‘Yes ... Laid down his life for this empire,’ Mehmood added.

‘And what good did it do?’ Husayn clenched his jaw. ‘The martyr’s only son is mopping dirty floors and playing songs for buffoons? No pension. No sort of compensation! Not even a “thank you”. Honestly, what’s the point of being a hero in a world where there is no gratitude, no money, nothing in return? Why does one even become a hero?’

Mehmood gave him a sad smile. ‘A hero doesn’t demand anything, my son. He doesn’t perform deeds for the world. He does them for himself. He does them because he knows it’s the right thing to do.’ Sighing, he looked at the two boys with misty eyes and left. Sinbad remained quiet. Mehmood’s words had reached his heart.

Husayn straightened up and scoffed, ‘That’s all bloody hogwash. Boss man is getting too sentimental nowadays. Now tell me what that Ja’far said —any dirhams in it?’

Sinbad shook his head. ‘None. Hunters don’t get paid for their services. I’m the only exception.’

‘A good one at that,’ Husayn added. Sinbad then explained the entire mission to him. After a slight moment of silence, Husayn said, ‘So we’re basically gonna die poor when the world ends? What a way to go.’ He did a slow clap.

Sinbad didn’t react. His thoughts were elsewhere. In this mission, he didn’t care about the money. This mission was an exception.

Safeena... She was an exception.

If it hadn’t been for her, he wouldn’t have even thought about accepting this mission or about the world ending.

‘Now since money is out of the picture, let’s take the moral high ground, all right?’ Husayn said. ‘I don’t want to live in a world of ashes and a beast ruling over us. So are we gonna do something about this?’

‘Yes.’ Sinbad nodded. ‘We have to.’

‘But what?’

‘There’s an Elder Seid coming. To guide us.’

‘Coming? Where? Here? Do you know what the Seid looks like?’

Sinbad shook his head. ‘I don’t know anything other than the name—Idris.’

Before Husayn could reply, they saw a figure walking towards them, and slamming a fish on the table on which Sinbad and Husayn had been resting their hands. Sinbad jerked up and saw the short-haired Chinese girl Pressa.

‘That’s a nice way to make an entry,’ Sinbad said. ‘Work on the theatrics more, perhaps?’

‘Shush, boy. Wasn’t the grave robbing enough drama for you?’ Pressa replied snottily. ‘Let me clarify something for you: I know everything about the both of you. And you, Sinbad,’ she said, picking up the fish and pointing it at him, ‘I know that you are somehow connected to saving the world from the Beast.’

Sinbad stepped back and unknowingly pushed a chair behind him. The noise echoed throughout the hall. Glancing confusedly at Husayn, he said, ‘Wait, how... who ... when ...’

‘Don’t be so dramatic and sit down, ya,’ Pressa slammed the fish on the table again forcefully. ‘Remember I told you I have to talk to you about something?’ Pressa’s thin brows rose. ‘Well, now’s the time. I’ll cut to the chase. I see things.’

‘Well, you do have eyes,’ Husayn said matter-of-factly.

Pressa smacked Husayn on the face with the fish. ‘I can smell too. And you smell like a salmon, you dimwit, dolt, imbecile, ignoramus.’

Husayn massaged his cheek, almost tearing up. ‘You didn’t have to hit me.’

‘With the fish or the synonyms?’ Pressa glared at him with wide eyes.

‘Well..Husayn began but stopped himself after looking at the fish.

‘Before I use this fish again,’ Pressa said, directing her eyes at Sinbad, ‘I see things, Sinbad. I have been able to do this from a young age, but I never really paid it enough attention. Now it is becoming clearer to me. I used to think that it was my overactive imagination until I saw Husayn all muddy and yapping while at the job. And then I learnt about the grave robbing thing and how it happened. I thought, oh wait—what if this isn’t something I am imagining, what if I can have visions of what’s really happening or what is about to happen or what has already happened?’

Sinbad looked pale. ‘You saw it... You saw what happened in the past?’ He was aghast. A seer amidst them? How could this be? It was such a brilliant coincidence. He recalled what Master Reis had once said: A great seer isn’t one who can only see the future, but one who can also see the present and the past.

Tragically, there are very few seers now; in fact they are so rare that many people don’t even know about them.

Sinbad stared at Pressa, who was wearing a dirty apron, smelling like onions and whose face was slightly blackened with dirt and grease from working in the kitchen. He blinked. Could this be true? Zarqa, the guild’s

soothsayer, could only see the future, but apparently, Pressa saw the past ...Is she then more powerful than Zarqa? But she's only thirteen...

Pressa went on, 'I have been focusing on you, Sinbad, and I have learnt a great deal. Only in images and not so consistently, but enough to know that you can tell me what to do with this gift or curse since you belong to some weird cult of magicians or whatever you call it. What do you say then?'

'Well,' Sinbad started slowly, 'it's definitely a gift. And it's not magicians. It's a cult of hunters who slay monsters. And in normal circumstances, I would have sent you to the guild.' Sinbad smiled, an idea popping up in his head. 'But I have something else planned for you.'

The three were in a small room, minus the fish.

Pressa was seated on an oval chair, facing Husayn and Sinbad. Sinbad bit his lips and said, 'I want you to tell me where Safeena Umair is.'

Pressa looked at Sinbad suspiciously and then closed her eyes. A long moment went by as she pressed her eyes tight, trying to concentrate, but she abruptly stopped. 'No use.

I can't see anything. It's like something is blocking me.'

Sinbad nodded. 'She must have cast the seer-resister spell on herself to avoid being tracked like this.'

'You speak a lot of gibberish, Sinbad, do you know that?' Husayn said out of frustration. 'What is a seer-resister spell?'

‘Black magic. That’s all you need to know,’ Sinbad responded. He looked at Pressa and said, ‘I want you to tell me how I can go about finding Safeena Umair. And I’m stressing on the how here.’

Pressa nodded and closed her eyes. Her lids began to flicker as the eyeballs moved from side to side. All of a sudden, she grabbed Sinbad’s arm and dug her nails into his skin.

‘I see it...’ she whispered. ‘It’s... it’s something related to the Greeks ... water... fish... old man... sea... I just...’ Drops of crimson liquid fell on Sinbad’s pale arms. Her nose was bleeding. Sinbad lightly touched her shoulder and Pressa zapped back to reality, her eyes opening. She was panting as she wiped the blood. ‘Wang ba dan!’ she shrieked in Chinese.

‘Are you okay?’

‘That hurt. Why did it hurt?’ she screamed, looking at Sinbad. But before he could respond, she stood up, grabbed his tunic and pulled him down to her level. Sinbad staggered forward awkwardly as he tried to adjust to Pressa’s four-foot-eleven-inch figure while he was close to six feet. ‘Why did it hurt, boy? Why?’

‘Calm down,’ said Sinbad and slowly loosened her grip. ‘Because it depends on the proximity of what you are seeing and the knowledge of who you are seeing. You were able to see me with ease and in detail because I was near by and I am just a human. But what you saw today—the one who can help us is someone sinister and not so ... human,’ Sinbad explained with utmost calm but felt a shiver all the same.

Husayn raised his brows. ‘Not human? What? Hold on, so you are saying you understand what Greeks, water, fish, old man and all that hogwash means?’

‘Yeah. Because I’ve dealt with that rat once.’ Sinbad gritted his teeth recalling the time with Master Reis in Mykonos, Greece. ‘But I didn’t know he would be here. Though he travels wherever pristine beaches and the clear shore welcome him... Well, I shouldn’t be surprised then.’

Pressa mumbled something in Chinese before saying, ‘Who is this “he”?’

‘He’s known as the Old Man of the Sea,’ Sinbad said, realizing that this mission is not going to be an easy one. ‘And he’s a Greek god.’

THIRTEEN

FOUR YEARS AGO

The moment they came close, the witch launched an attack.

The trees swayed heavily. Branches rattled, coming to life and crawling forward one by one. Making a quick move, Master Reis pulled out his thokcha sword and swung it against a branch, slashing it apart. As another branch went for him and Sinbad, he tackled it and cut it in half.

Meanwhile, the flowers on the ground danced and strange mouths formed on their buds. Sinbad stepped back, but the flowers uprooted from the earth and began walking towards him with their fang-like mouths opening and snapping close. He brought out his dagger that was tucked in his pants and swung the blade at the flowers that lurched forward at him. Without looking in their direction, he pierced them. But then more of them sprouted and uprooted, baring their fangs. It was all happening so quickly... Just then Master Reis shouted, ‘We come in peace!’

But the trees didn’t listen. With a new sinister soul inside them, the olive groves that once looked pretty were now growing dark and threatening. There was only the sound of rumbling thunder and cracks of lightning. The squawking of the large bird was heard from afar. It sounded agitated and angry.

The groves moved and formed a circle around Reis and Sinbad, who stood with their backs against each other and watched the rubber-like branches readying to whip them. Sinbad breathed hard, scared, never having imagined in his life that among all the monstrous creatures of the dark out there, trees will be the ones that he would be dying at the hands of.

Just then, he felt a lash of pain on his face, which left blood streaming from a long gash on his cheek. He let out a cry.

Reis instantly turned and leapt at the tree—stabbing it right in the middle, causing the bark to tear apart. The tree died on the spot. Another one rushed towards them, but Reis was ready as he swung his blade against the canopy and hit the branches. Suddenly, another one came from the periphery and aimed at the master's throat. But Reis was quick enough to turn around and fling the thokcha sword at it. The gleaming sky-iron blade flew in the air and went straight at the tree, snapped it in two and disappeared somewhere behind. Reis whistled and the sword returned to his hands. Reis smiled as he wiped the blade on his tunic. That was the special thing about the sword—it obeyed the owner and travelled on demand. But it took a lot of power and attachment for the sword to become emotionally linked to its wielder.

'This is crazy. We come in peace,' Reis yelled as Sinbad scurried closer to him, furiously slashing the branches that were wrapped around their feet. 'I'm a Seid. And I mean no harm.'

But there was no answer.

Flowers with fanged mouths were growing in abundance. More groves had grouped together. Lines of snaky branches moved on the forest floor, slithering towards them. 'It's too much, master,' Sinbad panted. 'She had so many of these planted around... They aren't here for beauty, but for an ambush... like this one,' Sinbad said, bewildered by the brains the other-worldly creatures possessed.

'A Seid?' All of a sudden, a woman's voice came. The groves parted in the middle to the sound of her fingers clicking and giving a zap of blue electricity. The woman appeared. 'Don't they also hunt witches?'

'Only the problematic ones.' Master Reis snickered, his sword ready to attack. 'Have you done anything that could be considered as a problem?' The red-haired woman raised her brows.

Sinbad noticed strange red freckles on her rough, squarish face. She shook her head, snapped her fingers and all the flowers and the trees froze. Just like how they are naturally supposed to be.

Sinbad straightened up, his hand caressing the bloody gash on his cheek. Master Reis sheathed his sword and said, ‘I mean no harm. I meant it. Truly.’

The woman stared at them suspiciously with her light-coloured beady eyes. ‘And what are you doing here?’

‘We could ask you the same thing,’ Reis responded.

‘I’m Leona from Byzantine.’

‘Far from home, aren’t you?’

‘Shouldn’t matter to you. I am a traveller. Found a nice little place to experiment with my potions when I saw the big bird.’

Master Reis nodded. ‘So you aren’t behind this bird’s mutation?’

‘You know it’s a mutation?’ She raised her brows, impressed.

‘Of course. It doesn’t come from any of our myths. Must be manufactured by something or someone.’ He smiled.

Leona narrowed her gaze. ‘I had no hand in its metamorphosis.

It’s a beautiful creature. Sometimes I feed him.’

‘I’m sure. But this beautiful creature is hunting the islanders.’

Leona shrugged. ‘Not my problem. Mortals have hunted witches for long. Might as well get what they deserve.’ She grimaced as she walked towards Sinbad and noticed his wound. ‘Ah, you are hurt. Want to come inside?’

Before Sinbad could speak, Reis said, ‘I wouldn’t mind some supper.’

Leona nodded and made them follow her towards the cottage.

‘How did you see me?’ she asked.

‘Scrying mirror.’

‘Of course.’

Without any hesitation, Master Reis asked, ‘Seen a girl around here?’

She stopped and looked back, clenching her jaw. ‘Why?’

‘She’s lost. Need to get her back to the village.’

Leona looked at Reis sternly before quietly answering, ‘Yes. I have.’

Sinbad noticed how clean and well decorated Leona’s cottage was.

There were many cauldrons of different sizes lined against the walls, but they didn’t smell like Master Reis’s back in Baghdad. She even had lots of glass tubes in which there were colourful liquids. Books and stacks of papers were neatly folded on her long desk. And one small ordinary bed occupied a corner of the cottage.

Leona gave Sinbad a clean cloth and cold water to clean the deep, red gash. He took out an ointment from his bag and massaged it lightly on his cheek as he saw a famished Master Reis working through his mutton and rice.

The witch sat on a rocking chair, her hands on the armrests. She wore a red tunic, which matched the colour of her hair, and loose beige-coloured

pyjamas with sandals and multiple signet rings on her fingers. Something about her was very naturally elegant.

‘You shouldn’t have attacked us, you know,’ Master Reis said.

‘You don’t look good enough to be someone who comes in peace,’ Leona barked at him.

Reis chuckled. ‘What do you know about the girl?’

‘She has cat eyes,’ Leona said as a brown hare hopped over to her. She picked it up and rubbed its ears. ‘And I’ve heard her call this giant bird “Roc”.’

‘Why?’ Reis raised his brows.

‘No clue. But she emits quite a peculiar energy—like never felt before,’ Leona thoughtfully mused. ‘I don’t think she’s human. If you catch her, I can check her in depth or you can take her to your guild who, by the way, learnt everything from our kind in the first place.’

Sinbad got up from his chair to look around the house. His eyes fell on the large painting above the back door. It was of a woman holding a sword and there was an indescribable animal next to her. The woman was in a long, white gown and there was a big pentacle made on it.

‘Hecate,’ Sinbad said, turning to Leona, who smiled at him. ‘The Mother of Witchcraft.’

‘We all follow her teachings.’ Leona nodded. ‘She was quite a woman and you...’ she said, glancing at Reis with disgust, ‘and your guild took those teachings, sorted the spells that a human can muster and used them exclusively.’

‘Well, that’s how we survive. Stealing and robbing from different races.’ Reis shrugged. ‘I have just a few questions and then we shall leave,’ he said, putting the plate on a side.

Leona reluctantly nodded. ‘Go on.’

Sinbad was busy watching the hare that Leona was caressing earlier and was now hopping around the room and wanted to be let out. Sinbad opened the door and it began to hop towards the silver canopied groves that were all around, like it was the witch's cottage lawn. He stepped out. They were oddly coloured trees and, for a moment, Sinbad just breathed deeply and appreciated their beauty, before he noticed something...

Something strange.

A muffled sound was coming from somewhere in the grove, as if someone was there, hiding. The brown hare hopped to the source of the sound when he heard 'shoo'.

Sinbad raised his brows. 'Is someone there?' He came forward to see a figure in the clearing in the grove.

A figure with cat eyes.

FOURTEEN

PRESENT DAY

Six days to Armageddon. Sinbad realized he was getting late.

‘Are you sure this is going to work?’ Husayn asked as he rowed the boat.

They had taken the transportation from the eastern shores of Umm Qasr Port of Basra at night when the Persian guards weren’t watching for anything suspicious along the coast. From the few dirhams that he had earned, Sinbad paid the ferryman who agreed to loan his reed boat. His only condition was that if they get caught for going out to sea without the official permit, the ferryman must not be mentioned and involved.

Sinbad didn’t mind, for he was immune to all sorts of unlawful acts.

‘Of course, it will.’ He held ajar of wine that he had stolen from the tavern. ‘I know the Old Man of the Sea. He has his weakness.’

‘Strange god. I thought only one existed. Didn’t know there were different for different countries,’ Husayn grunted and kept rowing.

They were in the middle of the dark sea, under the starry sky. From afar, Sinbad could see blinking lights that reminded him that he was still near civilization. The waves were tough and the boat swayed—expectedly so since they weren’t on a lake but out there in the ocean on a small reed boat, which technically wasn’t the best mode of transport in case one needed to survive. But they didn’t have time to hire a dhow because they had rushed to the shore as soon as they’d learnt about Pressa’s vision.

‘These are elemental gods,’ Sinbad clarified and stood up as Husayn stopped rowing. He cleared his throat and spoke loudly, ‘Lord Proteus, I bring thee my offering. Bless me with your divine presence.’

No response.

‘Who’s Proteus?’ Husayn whispered.

‘His actual name,’ Sinbad said. ‘The last time I met him, he was .. . well, let’s just say he was a freak. He jumped on my mentor and sat on his back as punishment for finding him. Then I had to bribe him by luring him with wine! Only then did he let my master go and reveal the information we needed about the mission we were going for.’

‘You have had quite a life,’ Husayn said.

‘It hasn’t ended yet.’

Tn six days it could. It’s already midnight.’

Sinbad gritted his teeth. He was wasting time if Proteus doesn’t turn up. ‘If Pressa is right in any way, he’s here. And if she isn’t, then we have no option.’ He paused for a moment. An idea just occurred to him. He opened the jar and lowered it, spilling the wine on the water.

The ocean began to heave. The waves grew in size and strength.

‘Ah, he’s getting angry.’ Sinbad smiled to himself. ‘If you don’t show up, Lord Proteus, I shall spill everything in the water. It’ll all get wasted,’ he said loudly.

‘Isn’t that... kind of redundant?’ Husayn asked, trying to still the boat with his hands. ‘I mean he’s a water god and you are pouring him wine in the water... so in a way, isn’t he drinking the wine? Then how are you wasting it?’

‘He is a god. He isn’t the water, Husayn. I really don’t want to talk technicalities ...’ Sinbad went quiet.

The water began to tremble violently, roaring and frothing, and a whirlpool formed in the centre jerking the puny reed boat and its occupants. And then emerged from deep within the ocean two gigantic thrones, splashing water and drenching Sinbad and Husayn. As he wiped his face, Sinbad saw that the throne was translucent, made of pure, bluish water itself, on which an old man with a white beard and outlandish green hair sat, wearing nothing but an electric blue loincloth. Next to him, on another gleaming blue throne sat an olive-skinned woman with blonde hair, wearing a white gown and seaweed as jewellery on her neck and arms.

‘First of all,’ the old man grunted, ‘that wine is spoiling the water. Second of all... give it to me.’

A seahorse made of water formed right next to the boat and put its head forward. Sinbad put the jar on his head and the seahorse glided a few metres to the throne, handing it over to Proteus, who immediately began sipping. The woman next to him scowled.

‘What?’ Proteus protested like a child. ‘I’m drinking it after ages.’

‘If you call a week an age, then you seriously have no limits and do not understand how time works,’ the woman said angrily.

‘Just a sip, my love, one little sip.’

‘Your choice.’

Proteus flared his nostrils as he gave the jar back to the seahorse who made a wheezing sound. Proteus winked at it and quietly signalled to him to keep the jar somewhere in secret so he could drink it later. The seahorse moved its fins and took the jar underwater.

The woman turned to Sinbad and Husayn and said, ‘Why did you have to call for him and give him this abomination? He’s going through a recovery programme. Why would you do this? We finally left the Greek islands to get away from this horrible, horrible stuff and to enjoy a nice vacation in the Persian Gulf only to be welcomed by you two juveniles. I

shall have your heads drowned for that!' she sneered and her aqua-blue eyes glowed.

Proteus smacked his head as if in surrender. 'Where are my manners? Gentlemen, meet my wife, Psamathe.'

Sinbad was confused. He didn't know what to say, but in the quest for words, he ended up saying the wrong thing: 'You have a wife? You didn't have a wife when we last met.'

'Oh? We've met?' Proteus scratched his green hair. 'That's odd. I don't remember you. But if you knew about my fascination with fine ale, then I'm sure we have met in the best of circumstances.' He laughed and water splashed around him. 'Who are you? Refresh my memory.'

'I'm...' Sinbad wanted to explain, but he realized it was better if Proteus didn't remember the kid who got the better of him and tricked him the first time they met. 'Umm... that's a long story. Maybe some other time. We need your help, Lord Proteus, and thus we called you.'

'Two mortals seeking help from a god?' Proteus knitted his brows. 'There are protocols now, don't you know? I can't help you unless you challenge me, be it physically or mentally.

I mean, if you want, we can have a duel right here, right now.' He snapped his fingers and the sky thundered. Piercing through the rolling waves came a pitchfork to his hand—it was the size of a dagger.

Husayn and Sinbad hid their giggles. They expected the weapon to be bigger.

'Sure, sure, big water man wants to fight and show off his "young blood",' Psamathe mocked.

Proteus protested, 'My love, why do you always have to be rude to me?'

'Because I'm irritated,' she said and folded her arms.

‘I’m sorry. I will do anything you ask of me.’

‘Well, you always say that. I can’t trust you.’

Proteus looked helpless. He grinned nervously at Sinbad, who was patiently waiting. ‘We’re always having such squabbles. Anyhow, what do you want to know?’

‘About a girl called Safeena Umair,’ Sinbad said.

‘I have no idea who this girl is.’

‘She came with the Nephilim.’

‘Ah, the cat-eyed woman!’ said Psamathe, suddenly sitting up. ‘As I recall, you’d called her “interesting”,’ she glowered.

‘First of all, she was 800 years younger than me and I’d met a human after a long time. Second of all, I didn’t like her. I just found her aura unnatural. Hence, I used the word “interesting”,’ Proteus explained. ‘Also, she was accompanied by the Nephilim... I don’t like that creepy lot.’

They are indeed creepy, Sinbad thought, recalling the time when he had experienced their unpredictable behaviour at first hand three years ago. He shook the thoughts away and asked the sea god and his wife, ‘So you know which way she went?’

Proteus spoke up excitedly, ‘Oh, of course. And also what she’s like.’

‘Tell me,’ Sinbad said, intrigued.

‘Well, it was when...’ Proteus began when Psamathe patted him on the arm worriedly. ‘Oh yes! I can’t tell you. Unfortunately, Father has put a condition on helping mortals—you need to throw me a challenge. But wait, haven’t I told you this already? Why did you ask me to tell you about the girl then? Oh, you were tricking me!’ His eyes blazed with fury. He snapped his fingers; Husayn braced himself and closed his eyes, but... nothing happened.

Only bubbles popped around the boat. Husayn was about to break into laughter when he saw slithery tentacles emerging from underneath and wrapping themselves around the reed boat that cracked and creaked.

‘An octopus owes me a favour,’ Proteus said with a smile. ‘Now will you challenge me or should I let you drown?’

‘All right, all right. I’ll challenge you... mentally,’ Sinbad sighed.

‘Oooh!’ Proteus clapped with enthusiasm. ‘Why don’t we do some riddles? I have always been good at them.’

‘All right. Ask away,’ Sinbad said, as he tried to maintain his balance on the rowboat along with Husayn. The octopus wasn’t being very generous in keeping the boat stable.

‘No,’ Proteus thoughtfully mused. ‘Let’s do it differently. Why don’t you ask me the riddles and I’ll answer? If I am not able to, I will tell you what I know about the girl. But if I am able to, you die.’

‘But... you can’t kill us just like that?’ Husayn hesitatingly protested.

Proteus raised his green-coloured brows. ‘Of course, I can! I’m a god. In a challenge, if you win, you gain. If you lose, you die.’ Husayn grunted and sat with a cowardly expression. Sinbad crossed his arms as he thought about it. ‘How many chances do I get?’

‘Three,’ Proteus replied as he turned to Psamathe. ‘Isn’t this fun, honey?’

‘It’ll be better if they get eaten by the octopus,’ Psamathe mundanely replied, fiddling with a kelp on her arm.

‘That’ll be swell,’ Sinbad sighed in frustration. ‘Okay. I have one. And it’s a tough one. Here goes: what has wings but can’t fly?’

Proteus mulled over it. ‘It could be chicken, but chickens can fly a short distance... so ... so I would say an ostrich.’

Sinbad grunted. ‘Correct.’

The octopus strangled the boat and one of its tentacles jutted out from below; a hole formed in the corner, letting the water seep in.

Sinbad spread his legs to balance the boat, while Husayn frantically tried to toss the water out with his palms.

‘You don’t have a lot of time,’ Proteus said with a fake grin across his face.

‘All right. All right. What has a big mouth but cannot speak?’ ‘Ajar!’ Proteus yelled, and there was a small wave. The boat cracked even further, and two parts of it fell into the water. The tentacles of the octopus emerged from the dark waters and grabbed Sinbad by the waist and Husayn by the legs, putting one upside down and hanging the other in mid-air. And the worst part was that Sinbad couldn’t even see the octopus. He could just see the greenish purple tentacles whipping them around, against the backdrop of Husayn’s cries as he swayed from side to side.

‘Okay... okay, focus. Last chance,’ Sinbad said when he felt unable to breathe.

Husayn added in a high-pitched voice, ‘Sinbad, it was nice knowing you. You are a great friend, always remember that. But I suppose we are going to be ended by a god who loves his wine and has marital issues.’

‘Hush.’ Sinbad closed his eyes, trying to rack his brain for ideas. In a split second, he opened his eyes, smirking. ‘Who has a beautiful wife who looks more than fine but loves to drink and cannot leave his wine?’

Just when Proteus opened his mouth to answer, Psamathe scowled. Proteus stopped himself. His eyes widened and he gulped nervously.

‘No, say it,’ Psamathe chided. ‘Say you cannot leave drinking.

Say it. I dare you, you pathetic god of seaweed.’

Proteus lowered his head and looked at Sinbad. ‘Smart move, mortal. You trapped me.’ He snapped his fingers and the octopus let go of Sinbad and Husayn who fell on the boat with a thud. The octopus vanished from sight and instantly, two seahorses made of water appeared and approached the humans. Proteus gestured and said, ‘Be my guest.’

They nudged Sinbad and Husayn from their spots vigorously. Both had no option but to sit on the seahorses, which made Sinbad feel really weird since the seahorse was made of water and yet so solid. He looked up at the Greek god. ‘Well?’

‘Safeena Umair left for the east, the little I could gather from underwater chatter. Also, her aura strangely smelled of sulphurium. Is this piece of information good enough for you?’

It was, but how would he use it? Sinbad asked himself.

‘Now off you go!’ He waved at the seahorses, who reversed and sped towards the shore.

Sinbad’s hair whipped back and he saw a terrified Husayn beside him, clutching his seahorse’s watery skin. Sinbad looked ahead; the frothy waves were gentler than before. He could feel the glide as they galloped, the salty wind hitting his face and hair. It was delightful.

As they reached the shore, the seahorses made an echoing neighing sound. Sinbad and Husayn jumped down. Sinbad waved to the animals who instantly dissolved in the ocean.

‘That was ...’ Husayn exhaled, ‘something.’

‘I’m disappointed. I was expecting you to be shocked.’

‘I am immune to shocks now,’ Husayn replied coolly. Sinbad chuckled, thinking about how spooked Husayn was just a few minutes ago.

Sinbad realized that they were far off from the main port of Basra. But that wasn’t the problem. The problem was, what would he do with his new-

found information?

‘Pressa said that what Proteus would tell us would help us in tracking down Safeena,’ Sinbad said. ‘But he talked about her aura.’

‘Unless we can smell the aura and then follow her tracks, we can’t do __’

Sinbad’s eyes widened and he kissed Husayn on the forehead.

‘Thank you! I got it. I know what to do.’

‘What?’ Husayn frowned in puzzlement.

‘We need to find someone who can smell auras. The ability of doing that is called clairalience and only one race possesses it other than the gods.’

‘Why not another god like Proteus?’ Husayn asked.

‘Sure, since we had such a fun time with the one we just met. No. A god wouldn’t work with us. They have this strict code of staying away from mortal affairs. But I know someone who might just help us,’ Sinbad said, a smile creeping to the corners of his lips.

‘I don’t like that smile.’ Husayn flared his nostrils. ‘Who is it?’ ‘Her name is Ashrafiyah. She’s an old associate,’ Sinbad said.

‘That doesn’t sound half bad,’ Husayn replied.

Sinbad smiled. ‘Well, she’s a vampire.’

FIFTEEN

FOUR YEARS AGO

He followed the cat-eyed girl.

Sinbad’s heartbeat quickened as he sprinted into the ashen woods. He wanted to call out to his master, but before he could even make a noise, the girl had dashed off.

But he didn’t want to miss this opportunity. He had the dagger to plunge inside this Devil’s child and he also had a wooden stake, which was a major weakness for demons. If I do it, if I kill the girl, Master Reis would be proud of me.

As he reached the middle of the woods where a parliament of owls sat atop the branches, blinking rapidly, he called out to her, ‘It’s fine. I won’t hurt you. I know your name. Safeena.’

He couldn’t see the cat eyes anywhere and wasn’t even sure whether she was here or not. He walked a bit further, searching the bushes for any signs of life.

The sun blazed hot and since the ashen trees didn’t form thick canopies, rays of light fell over Sinbad. He looked down and saw his shadow. And in it, he saw another shadow, a few yards away, which commingled with the shadow of a tree branch.

She’s on the tree. I have to play it cool.

‘Safeena, I’m a friend,’ Sinbad said, trying to imitate Master Reis — calm and composed—even though he had goosebumps on the back of his neck. ‘I only wish to talk to you.’

He didn’t look up immediately as that would have startled her.

But he slowly swivelled around, flashing a charming smile.

There she was, perched high up on a branch like a monkey. Her cat eyes were so distinct that Sinbad didn’t care about her other features. She was, though, wearing a clean, floral dress.

She looked at him with suspicion.

‘Hi there,’ he said. ‘I’m Sinbad.’

She didn’t respond. Or move.

Is it a good sign?

‘Do you like... um...’ Sinbad asked and scoured through the bag, but she got alarmed and hissed at him. ‘No... no... I’m not trying to hurt you,’ Sinbad said as he pulled out a book. ‘Do you like to read?’

Her eyes widened. ‘Read,’ she said.

‘Yes. It’s a book with words made up of letters...’ Sinbad didn’t know how to explain to her what a book was since he had naturally taken to reading. ‘Do you read?’

She nodded.

‘What do you read?’

‘Bleh.’ She made a face.

‘Bad stuff, eh?’

She nodded again.

‘Who makes you read?’

Her eyes shimmered. Sinbad realized that she was hiding something. But he didn’t want to pursue it, otherwise she would get hurt and run away. ‘You want this book? It’s about fairy tales. About a beautiful princess in a castle. And a mad prince who wants to get rid of her but can’t because he loves her. He knows she’s a threat to him, but... Ah, the rest is something you should read yourself.’

The girl blinked and, in an instant, she hung upside down from the branch, coming to Sinbad’s level, and stretched out her arms.

Sinbad, though slightly startled, gave her the book. Safeena pulled herself back and began reading it, quickly devouring the words with her eyes. One second she’d let out a chuckle and a wide smile in the next.

Sinbad observed the girl. He couldn’t understand how such an innocent and pure person... could be made from the limb of the Devil. He just didn’t get it. He ruminated about her for a while until the winds began to roar and the skies turned grey. Then came the sound of the bird: squawk!

‘Go,’ she said, looking up. ‘Go.’ She was worried.

‘Okay, okay.’ Sinbad shuffled his feet and quickly asked, ‘Will you meet me again?’

She nodded.

That was when the bird appeared.

Looming, it flapped its wings with such mighty force that the trees began to break from their roots. Sinbad scuttled against the harsh wind to take cover behind a bush as the giant bird flew over him, trying to get at him with its elephant-sized talons.

Sinbad almost dodged it, rolling on the ground. The bird was gigantic and he was breathing heavily while trying his best to hide from it.

He heard the girl saying, ‘No threat! No threat! Friend.’ For a moment, Sinbad thought that she was saying that to him, but he realized that it was directed at the giant bird.

Though it seemed like the bird didn’t believe her because it made one more attack, trying to grab Sinbad with its talons, squawking loudly in the process ...

And it was close.

Sinbad could see the razor-sharp claws coming at him. He closed his eyes.

Seconds went by. He hadn’t been hurt or lifted...

Just as he opened his eyes, he found Master Reis standing between the bird and him, with his sword deflecting the talons and making an incisive cut. The bird moaned loudly and flew up somewhere.

When did he come?

‘Are you fine, boy?’ he asked.

Sinbad nodded, coming to his feet, as he saw the bird was still hovering—carefully studying the scene for its next attack. In the other corner, he saw the witch Leona with sparks of energies emanating from her fingers that she was directing towards the bird, but the bird was dodging them.

‘Noooo!’

Sinbad heard a cry; it came from Safeena who was still on top of the tree, looking horrified.

‘It’s her,’ Reis said excitedly. ‘I’ll handle the bird. You go for the girl. Use a faint smoke. You remember it?’

Sinbad nodded. It was a yellowish powder canned inside a ball that if thrown would explode and create a fainting sensation, and the person would

collapse. Safeena had dismounted the tree, trying frantically to get to the bird. He knew this was his cue. He got hold of the ball and rushed to Safeena.

The bird, meanwhile, glided towards Reis, who made another cut with his sword and scared it off. Leona rushed to Reis's side, tackling the creature with ferocity as Reis continued swishing the sword to disarm and frighten the bird, who was not getting affected one bit.

With the ball in his hand, Sinbad ran towards Safeena, but this frightened her and she sprinted away from him.

'No, wait!' Sinbad hollered, but she didn't listen.

He decided to throw the ball, aiming it at her... and as he did.. . he felt a smack against his back that made him fall face down on the ground. He tried to wriggle and move, but his energy was depleting. Everything seemed dull and heavy. He looked up, his vision now blurring. Safeena was running towards the creature and before she knew it, she was carefully picked up by the giant bird and flown off.

And that was the last of it, before he drowned in darkness.

SIXTEEN

PRESENT DAY

‘We need to go to Oman,’ Sinbad flattened the map and said to his friends, Pressa and Husayn. ‘There is a port town called Sohar. Lots of Romanian vampires migrated there since there are deserts and an ideal hiding place for them. They even instructed the locals to do their bidding and one of the vampires was Ashrafiyah.’

‘Vampires?’ Pressa widened her eyes. ‘Ooh, bad, bad. Heard about them in stories, ya. The bloodsuckers and all.’

‘Yeah, well, they aren’t exactly bloodsuckers,’ Sinbad said. ‘But that’s a conversation for another time. Now, to travel to Oman, we need a ship. And as you both know, I have a lot of money to loan a ship.’

Husayn said, ‘Me too.’

‘I don’t have it!’ Pressa exclaimed. ‘Not as rich as you boys.’

Sinbad slapped his palm on his forehead. ‘We were being sarcastic, Pressa. And also, you aren’t pitching in even if you had the money, since you aren’t going.’

‘What?’ Pressa put both her arms on her hips and arched her brows. ‘You aren’t bringing the one person who can help you and are taking this cretin along with you?’ She pointed at Husayn.

‘Hey! I’m not an idiot. I help him a lot.’

‘Like how?’ rasped Pressa.

‘I’m a smooth-talker.’

‘Smooth-talk out of this situation, boy.’

Sinbad stepped between them. ‘Okay, calm down, both of you. Pressa, Husayn has been a huge help ever since I came here. He’s the first person to know who I was by nature and made sure I survived here. Got me to make money out of what I do. Husayn can’t see the future, but he’s the only lad I trust, and that’s a power not many people have in my life.’

‘And you don’t trust me?’ Pressa asked, glaring.

‘You are thirteen. And you are ... impulsive.’

Pressa gritted her teeth. ‘Ben dan!’ she swore in Chinese. ‘Unlike you both, I actually want to save this world because...’ she stopped mid-sentence. ‘I just do, all right?’

Sinbad looked at her. He recognized the earnestness in her voice. She was looking away; it seemed that she was hiding something. He wanted to ask, but he didn’t have time. He looked out of the wine cellar’s window and saw several elongated shadows in the early evening light. The smell of grapes was highly nauseating and he planned to leave the room after brainstorming with his comrades. ‘All right, you can help us till we are at the shore.’

‘Whatever.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘How do we get the money for the ship now, ya? Got any ideas?’

Sinbad looked at Husayn, who seemed lost in thought, and said, ‘I can ask for more contracts on repelling other-worldly creatures, but that will take time and will yield very little money compared to what we want for a ship. And not just a ship, we need a crew as well.’

‘We are a bunch of kids, Sinbad. Can’t that Ja’far help?’ Husayn said.

‘That ship has sailed, Husayn. I could have asked him for a ship and he would have given it to us, but we don’t have time to contact him. He’s

gone back to Baghdad.’

‘Then what about that guild mentor they had assigned for you? That Seid... Idris?’

‘No sign yet.’ Sinbad shrugged.

‘This is not going well,’ Husayn sighed. ‘Worst-case scenario, we can ask Mehmood for it. Like a loan. We’ll tell him we are thinking of exporting this wine to the islands of the Persian Gulf. I have been planning to do that for a while ... down the line, if we save the world.’

‘Good idea.’ Sinbad smiled. Though the problem was that Mehmood wouldn’t give money to Husayn, for he was a miser.

As they pondered, they heard a huge ruckus outside. Sinbad, Pressa and Husayn shared confused glances. Sinbad rolled the map and all three went out to check.

As he walked in the main hall of the tavern, Sinbad saw tables and chairs being tossed and thrown in different directions. Mehmood was pleading with two bulky men. They were bald, sported tattoos on their faces and had iron teeth. In the centre stood a man in a maroon robe and a golden baldric. He had a rather gaunt face that was replete with a thin twirled moustache. Given his presence, he looked like the leader. He slowly said to Mehmood, ‘You need to pay us our due, swine. We loaned you 3000 dirhams to start this shop and you haven’t paid us the money.’

Three thousand dirhams?

‘I paid you in full,’ Mehmood whimpered and cried.

‘Not the interest!’ The man let out a sly smile. ‘I want the interest as well, all right? You have seven hours.’ He gestured for his guards, who looked like smugglers, to follow him, leaving behind everything in ruins.

Mehmood sat in the chair nearest to him, contemplating his fate.

‘So the idea of... erm... taking a loan from Mehmood won’t work out, I guess?’ Pressa said innocently. ‘What now, boys?’

Sinbad sighed and looked at Husayn. ‘Who was he?

‘Filth, that’s who he was!’ Husayn said angrily. ‘That was Fazeen, the lord of all smuggling operations in Basra. He is also a slumlord, helps out people living in the poorer areas and hires orphans to make them porters-cum-thieves. He also makes money by giving money to businessmen. A multifaceted crime lord, one might say. Though of late, his men have been dying and his business is failing, thus he’s been desperate and taking money from small-time loaners like poor Mehmood... but,’ he said, a smile coming to his face, ‘I have an idea because I just recalled something I’d heard in the streets, a secret of his ...’

‘Don’t tell me we are going to blackmail him? Or trick him?’ Sinbad said exasperatedly. ‘Because I don’t want to be put in prison again or worse, killed by his men.’

‘Well...’ Husayn smiled triumphantly. ‘We are going to make Fazeen a proposition and I’m certain he won’t refuse.’

SEVENTEEN

FOUR YEARS AGO

'Why did you hit him?' came the faint voice of Master Reis. But Sinbad could sense the anger in his tone.

'I didn't hit him,' Leona replied. 'He came in between.

I was going for the girl.'

That's all Sinbad could hear. After this, he remembered feeling that he was lifted by someone and that his master was constantly muttering worriedly.

When he opened his eyes again, he found himself in the room they had at the garrison compound. In front of him, Commander Qasim and Master Reis stood. Reis made him drink something. 'You'll be fine, boy. I'm proud of you. I don't give you enough credit.'

'Is he going to be all right?' Qasim asked.

'Yes,' Reis replied.

'What happened to him?'

'Snakebite,' Reis lied.

Why do you lie? Sinbad wanted to ask, but his lips were pale and dry, his tongue numb.

He closed his eyes.

He felt the hours go by.

When he opened them again, he saw Master Reis in the room going through some documents. Sinbad sat up straight. He felt like he'd had the best sleep of his life. Master Reis turned to him and said, 'I hope you are rested, boy. The spell was life-threatening. I had to bring you back... and treat you with oils made from nectar.'

Sinbad nodded, rubbing his eyes. 'What happened to the witch? Did she hit me? I heard something.'

He looked away. 'She claims it was an accident.' He shook his head. 'Get ready. We need to go.'

Sinbad nodded dutifully.

Time to work.

Sinbad and Master Reis walked to the granary of the garrison compound.

Sinbad had no idea why. But then, Master Reis never did share details.

There was a guard standing outside, who instantly straightened up on spotting Reis.

'Have a few queries,' Reis said.

It was early morning and there was no sound, not even a chirp. Life went on, but Sinbad couldn't stop thinking about Safeena—of how delicate

she looked.

‘Yes, sir,’ said the soldier.

‘Has there been any attack on the granary?’ Reis asked.

‘Attack? No sir.’

‘Any loss of food, any stolen items?’

‘No, sir. It’s all well recorded and guarded,’ he said proudly.

‘Who looks over the granary?’ Reis asked.

‘The commander.’

‘I see.’ Reis nodded, looking over at Sinbad. ‘Let’s go.’

Without thanking the guard, Reis moved towards the exit door with his apprentice.

‘What was that about, master?’ Sinbad asked.

‘You’ll know. But I can promise you one thing. There’s something strange going on here. And I’m not talking about the witch and the bird.’

Sinbad was befuddled. Master Reis was so secretive. ‘Where do we go next?’

‘To the ashen forest,’ Reis replied, referring to the place where Sinbad had got himself hurt and where the bird had attacked them. ‘The last time we were there, I saw something when I came to rescue you.’

‘What?’

‘Voodoo dolls,’ he said. ‘And you know what they mean?’

Sinbad’s blood froze. ‘Black magic.’

Sinbad and Reis circled the witch’s house and went towards the back as they didn’t want to alert her.

The ash-coloured forest seemed worse than last time. Most groves had broken after falling victim to the claws of the giant creature. There were many cracks in the ground.

Sinbad had his scrying mirror as he looked around for clues. He scanned the area while trailing his master.

‘There’s something here,’ Reis called out, stopping in his tracks.

Sinbad saw what his master was pointing at: it was a body of a boar with its head strategically cut and displayed in a gruesome manner. Reis knelt down, smelling it, while Sinbad stayed back, blocking his nose.

‘Sacrifice,’ Master Reis said, ‘but very poorly done. Not by a professional.’ He turned the head of the boar and said, ‘Hmmm,

incisive cuts but not deep.’

‘Do you think Leona did this?’

‘No,’ he said.

They left the boar as it is and walked ahead, hoping to find something else... and that’s when they saw rag dolls hanging from a tree. The faces were covered with old sacks.

Sinbad felt his heart thudding against his chest. He tried to control his anxiety, muttering something under his breath.

Master Reis seemed as cool as a cucumber. He walked to the dolls and checked their feet, where the toes were supposed to be. They were coloured purple. Also, their hay-filled bodies were gnawed and had claw marks.

‘Summoning ritual. Used to call the spirits of the victims. They were then picked up by the bird. But why would Leona do a summoning of the spirit ritual? It’s ... ah...’ And then he realized.

Sinbad turned away from the creepy sight as he tried to regulate his breathing. He hadn’t seen any of this before and it was extremely frightening for him.

‘Boy?’ Master Reis said. ‘We have someone far more sinister than the bird here, and it’s not the little girl. It’s the person who’s teaching the little girl this form of black magic, and this forest is her training ground. The bird is not killing the islanders or eating them—it’s being used as a threat to bring the victims here.’ He shook his head with disgust as he announced, ‘Leona lied. She did know the girl and it was no accident that she threw a spell on you so you won’t be able to catch her. And now... we need to confront her and find out who she’s working for.’

EIGHTEEN

PRESENT DAY

They stood in front of the most dangerous man in Basra.

To arrange this meeting, Husayn had pulled some strings with the thieves who worked for the crime lord, who had led him to the man's most trusted guards. Husayn said to them, 'I can help him save his empire in this port town.' The guards were initially sceptical about hearing out a sixteen-year-old, but had to give in since Husayn's badgering and begging just wouldn't stop. The next day, Sinbad and Husayn stood in Fazeen Malik's den.

The spacious hall had an unusually high ceiling, ornately decorated wooden doors and a floor strewn with hay. Tall, hefty men holding swords and daggers stood in every corner of the room. Sinbad wasn't frightened of humans though; they were the most good-looking lot in the world, even the bald-headed, one-eyed guard who bore his eyes into the two juveniles. With the lanterns burning to give light, the room was quite hot and the air thick. The sound of horse-drawn carriages was heard in the distance.

They had been blindfolded before entering this place and when it was removed, Sinbad saw Fazeen Malik sitting on a throne, flanked by around fifty security guards.

'Now you say that you can save my business. But my business is running as smooth as cream. Why are you spreading false rumours then? And give me one reason why I shouldn't gut you, the liars that you are,' Fazeen said while chewing betel.

Husayn, the smooth-talker smiled. ‘The great Lord Fazeen, we both know that isn’t true. Your market is dying. And your men are being haunted and hunted. I was walking around the city—I do that a lot, networking and making new friends—and that’s when I met a simple man who worked for you. A bookie, one might say. We started talking and we soon became pally. Later this man told me that there’s something supernatural hunting you and your business. Many of your men have lost their mental faculties, some even perished gruesomely. He said there was one who had seen the evil creature who’s behind this, is that right?’ All the guards who were standing at attention, began to fidget and went pale, as if they’d just seen the hounds of hell. ‘I don’t stick my nose in other people’s business, and as long as my partner here...’ said Husayn, pointing to Sinbad, ‘and I don’t have people coming to us and asking for our services, we don’t interfere. But now we had to because we’d like to make a quick deal with you.’

Fazeen narrowed his eyes. ‘If I say—and this is a big if—that there is something out there and it could have hoodwinked my guards, how will you two kids help me?’

‘Well, I’m just his manager,’ he said as he turned to Sinbad. ‘But this boy is a Seid who has exceptional knowledge. He will get rid of your problem tonight itself. He’s called Sinbad the Sailor, for he has defeated monsters across the sea.’

‘What monster? Name one!’ Fazeen leant forward with his hands on his throne.

‘Aye, I have defeated giants,’ Sinbad lied, ‘who invade many a ship.’

‘Giants, you say.’ Fazeen nodded gravely. ‘You see, lads, I don’t believe you, but maybe, let’s just say maybe, I am in a fix and one of my main guards saw it—the spirit. He has looked like a ghost ever since. If you say what you claim is true and there really is something, get rid of it. I don’t want anything to affect my men’s lives.’ He paused.

‘Oh well, we shall, but what about us? We are starving. What can you offer us?’ Husayn asked cheekily.

‘What do you want?’

‘A ship. And lots of people on it who can be trusted and who accompany us across the sea.’

Fazeen nodded as he looked at his guards, who seemed to be quietly happy that he had accepted the deal that could save them from the unknown. While Fazeen was oblivious to this, Sinbad noticed that the guards knew more—in fact, they knew enough to understand that the people who could overpower the creature who was hounding them were worth giving an expensive ship and a crew. ‘All right,’ Fazeen said, ‘save my business and my men and I shall give you what you want and then some.’

Sinbad did not want more. He simply said, ‘Need to speak to the guard who saw it. Take me to him, Lord Fazeen.’

Sinbad was in one of the many quarters in this big den. As he walked, he found himself passing by Fazeen’s room from where a woman was peering at him.

Sinbad got an eerie feeling but kept walking towards the guardroom. Fazeen accompanied him while Husayn waited outside. Fazeen knocked on the door and as they waited, he asked Sinbad, ‘Is it true what they say about Seids—that when they are taken in as orphans, their memories are cleaned so they don’t remember where they have come from? Makes it easy for the guild to influence their minds.’

Sinbad raised his brows. It was true that he didn’t remember his past... and sometimes he missed that and longed to know that part about himself.

He did not grow up like an ordinary Arabian child. ‘I don’t know. Might I ask you something?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why are you so cryptic about this demon who is haunting your men?’

‘Because I don’t know what to think of it... It’s strange. And I am unable to find ways to help.’

‘Wait. Strange how?’

‘My men haven’t said that they are being haunted by a ferocious soul.’

‘Then?’

Fazeen sighed. ‘They say it resembles a baby.’

The door opened and the guard came into view—languid and wrapped in blankets. He stared at Sinbad suspiciously with hollow eyes and then turned to Fazeen, bowing to him out of respect.

‘Bilal, this is Sinbad. He wants to speak to you about what you went through. He can help you.’

Bilal was a meek-looking man or maybe had become one, Sinbad thought.

‘I’ll take it from here,’ Sinbad said to Fazeen.

‘I’d like to be in the room,’ Fazeen protested.

‘No. Let me do this my way.’

Fazeen clenched his jaw and nodded as he left the room.

Sinbad looked back at Bilal who stood up, concern plastered across his face. He leant against the wall. ‘They say you are the only survivor. Tell me everything from the beginning.’

Bilal’s eyes travelled to a jug of water on his side table on which a lantern sparked reflections, and he said, ‘We noticed the strange ... sighting when we used to go and work for our master... at the docks. At first we made fun of it, thinking it was a prank. It looked like ... a baby. Because it crawled towards us. We would... we would run away and later, when we’d turn around, it wouldn’t be there. I noticed... that it would come every fourteenth day of the month... not a spirit any more but something in between...

perhaps a creature... and soon, the men started being harmed. It became so frequent that we used to predict who’d be next.’

‘But how would this thing hunt you?’ asked Sinbad.

‘I mean, couldn’t you just stab it with silver?’

‘Everyone was just terrified...’ Bilal replied, looking down. ‘We used to run for our lives ... but then it would turn into that thing on the fourteenth and get one of us. It was the next day when we would see the result. We ... I never saw it up close ... until a few days ago.’ He shivered. ‘There was a night shipment from Dhofar.. . a shipment was coming to Basra... and I was there to receive it alone. It was then that I saw it crawling towards me so quickly that it... it grabbed hold of my neck and whispered, “Take me to the graveyard”.’

Sinbad pursed his lips slightly. ‘How did it look?’

‘Demonic. Its skin was all red. And its eyes were bigger than its mouth. It just...’

‘It’s all right,’ Sinbad said briskly. ‘What did you do then?’

‘I had to... You see, it kept whispering to me. But... but then with each passing minute, it began to grow and expand while holding me high in the air. But when he found it difficult to maintain his grip on me, all of a sudden, I fell down. Then, in a rage, it rasped and started clawing at me. Fortunately, it didn’t know that I was wearing a silver ring, so I punched it

hard and escaped from there. No one else who has met the thing had been that lucky... and I don’t want to go out to face it again.’

Sinbad crossed his arms and nodded. He knew who Bilal had seen. He had read about these creatures in one of his books on ghouls when Master Reis taught him—creatures or souls who would cling to your back and grow in size, the Mylings. But Mylings always did it for a reason.

And he had to find that reason.

‘Does Fazeen have a child?’

‘Child? I, uh...’ Bilal’s pupils dilated. ‘I can’t say, but

I would suggest you talk to sir’s wife, Mistress Feyrouz. Her room is two doors down...’

But Sinbad had stopped listening. He rushed out to see an empty corridor. Fazeen had gone downstairs. Sinbad walked to the room where he’d earlier seen the woman and he knocked.

‘Mistress Feyrouz! I’m Sinbad. I’m here to talk about the mysterious happenings.’

No response.

‘I believe all this is being done by your child.’

The door opened and there stood an angry woman with brown, curly hair, looking at Sinbad with bloodshot eyes. ‘How dare you! How dare you speak of her! She’s long gone ...’ Her voice cracked.

‘Well, that got your attention. I only mean well, Mistress Feyrouz. She needs to be freed from this physical world.’

Her eyes softened.

‘Do you or do you not want your child to be freed?’

She paused. ‘I do.’

Sinbad said callously, ‘Then you know about the unexplained events and the creature that appears on the fourteenth of every month. She was born on the fourteenth, right? I know that this is correct. So, answer me succinctly and give me only the truth.’

Sinbad knew he was being harsh. At times like these, he would become immune to human interactions and wouldn’t pay heed to how much anyone was offended. That’s what Master Reis had taught him. That’s who a Seid is.

‘How did you lose your child?’

‘She was born perfectly fine, but then...’ She blinked back tears and said, ‘Fazeen said that there was something wrong with her, that she was not breathing fine and so, he took her to a doctor. Later he told me that she had left our world... died. It was horrible.’ She paused and blurted out, ‘Why... why are you making me relive these bad memories? Why? And is she back... How? I... I don’t understand...’

Sinbad looked at the distressed woman for a moment. He wanted to feel something, but he didn’t. Because the mission was the only thing on his mind.

It was midnight and he had only five days left to find the trumpet.

I shouldn’t be getting stuck in this emotional affair.

And as Mistress Feyrouz cried, leaning against the door, Sinbad left to meet the actual culprit.

NINETEEN

FOUR YEARS AGO

‘What are we going to do?’ Sinbad asked.

They were near the witch’s house. And Master Reis was irate. Sinbad could see the frustration, the rage boiling inside him.

‘We are going to kill her,’ he said. ‘But not before we trap her.’

They reached the door.

‘How will we do that, master?’

‘Remember your lessons, boy. I can’t spoon-feed you all the time.’

Sinbad was deep in thought.

Master Reis banged on the door. ‘Just improvise when you have to.’

Sinbad’s mind raced through the theory lessons Master Reis used to teach him during their travels in different parts of the world. And in the case of witches, Sinbad could only recall that a witch is very tough to kill since witches act like tricksters. But while tricksters are just mischievous, witches are intelligent and are ahead of their opponent by three times.

Sinbad saw the hare hopping around the house. And the goat with the deer antlers grazing nearby.

The door opened and the red-haired witch looked at them, confused. ‘What is it now?’ Leona asked.

‘Need to speak to you,’ Master Reis said.

‘About?’ Leona had half-blocked the door.

‘Do you have someone inside, perhaps a little girl?’

Leona clenched her jaw. ‘No.’ She opened the door to show that the room was empty. ‘Can’t a sorceress have a little privacy?’

‘Not when she’s being so hostile towards their guests, especially when she had hurt one of them.’

Leona glanced at Sinbad, her eyes softening. ‘I’m sorry, kid. Hope you are okay. It was not a curse spell, so I’m sure with a little

‘I would like to talk to you about the girl,’ Master Reis interrupted. ‘I have learnt something new about her.’

Leona mulled it over and said, ‘All right. Come in.’

Sinbad and Master Reis entered the dimly lit room that smelled of wood and various candles that were burning and casting shadows on the wall.

As the witch went to fetch mugs and juice, Sinbad’s mind went to his lessons on how witches could be destroyed—he knew Master Reis was planning something and he needed to be prepared.

They need to be trapped, he recalled. And they can be killed only then. Though to trap them, they can’t be bound in a sigil like a demon. No. They have to be somehow...

Sinbad’s thoughts meandered as Leona came back and handed them their mugs. He looked at his mug and it had apricot juice. He looked over at Master Reis, hoping he might give some indication whether to drink this or not since it might contain poison.

But he didn’t. Instead, he took a sip as if there was no threat.

Sinbad followed suit.

‘So what is it that you’ve learnt?’ Leona asked as she walked to her study table and sat on the chair.

She was writing something before they had come in and Sinbad spotted some half-blank pages. A floating quill was next to her, waiting for her instructions.

‘You like to write?’ Master Reis asked.

‘Sometimes. I’m a bit into literature,’ Leona said. ‘So, what is it, tell me?’

‘You know, I was wondering,’ Master Reis started, ‘how you sourced the food that you served us.’

‘What do you mean? I grew it. I’m a witch.’ She chuckled.

‘Yes. But the kind of salt put in the cured meat was the same as what was put in the food we had in the garrison compound. I went to the granary to check, hoping I might learn that you stole from there.’ Reis kept the mug on her study table, looking straight into her eyes. ‘But nothing had been reported stolen. So I believe you have an insider who knows who you are and supplies you food.’

Leona smirked. ‘And... so what? What does it prove?’

‘Nothing, until I realized you also knew the girl.’ Master Reis smirked. ‘I found the dolls and the boar as proof. Tell me. Since when have you been teaching her black magic?’

‘That’s my stuff. I didn’t teach her...’ she lied but stopped herself, pursing her lips.

That’s when Sinbad remembered how to trap a witch.

It was by taking a part of her body—be it a strand of her hair or a nail or a skin peel—and trapping it in a bottle.

‘And it made me wonder that perhaps the insider knows about you teaching the girl and in fact wants you to teach her. You are both working for someone to make sure she turns to the dark side, and this giant bird was one of the black magic mutation spells you taught her that worked out pretty well.’ Master Reis smiled. ‘Now, wouldn’t it be great if a particular Seid comes in and disturbs that arrangement?’ He paused. ‘But the worse thing in all of this is that you hurt my apprentice. And for that, you shall pay.’

Leona, channelizing her mental energies, immediately instructed the floating quill to attack Master Reis. He bent down and dodged it. Pulling out his dagger, he grabbed Leona’s arm swiftly, slamming it on the table and slicing her thumb. Leona thrashed around and cried in pain as she fell from the chair, and

Master Reis took the bleeding sliced thumb and put it in a glass bottle he carried in his satchel.

‘You are trapped, you degenerate,’ Master Reis spoke in a thin voice. ‘If only you had not harmed my apprentice.’

The witch had tears in her eyes. She shuffled back, flaring her nostrils. ‘You don’t realize who I am. I am not just an ordinary witch you can trap, you fool. And if you think you have bound me, you are wrong... for I am a demon.’

And the witch snapped her fingers. Her thumb rattled in the bottle in Reis’s satchel... and returned to her.

Master Reis and Sinbad looked at the bottle—it was empty.

The witch’s eyes beamed with red sparks and she said, ‘I’m Leonard, the grand master of witchcraft, the Lord of Occult and the most faithful general of Iblis.’

‘The Black Man,’ Master Reis said quietly.

Sinbad had read about him. It came from the Germanic mythology. The Black Man was so named because his face was all black, like the never-ending lightless and hopeless pits of hell.

But Sinbad was startled out of his ruminations, for their opponent struck a large amount of lightning beams at them. And everything turned to pitch-black darkness.

TWENTY

PRESENT DAY

‘It was you!’ Sinbad declared, barging into Fazeen’s office.

Fazeen, who was with one of his men in his office downstairs, looked up. Seeing this insolence, he gestured for the man to leave and then directed his attention to the boy. ‘Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kill you for what you just did.’

‘I will give you a good reason. You are the reason why your men are dying.’

Fazeen arched his brows. ‘Are you mad? How do I—’

‘You had a child, didn’t you?’ Sinbad began, walking around the room. ‘Now it haunts you as a Myling.’

‘A what?’ Fazeen asked, bewildered.

‘It’s kind of a ghoul. It only happens if it wasn’t buried properly and didn’t die of natural causes.’ Sinbad let out a slow smile. ‘Now tell me, Fazeen, you had a healthy child, then why did you kill her?’

‘She wasn’t breathing...’ Fazeen started to sweat.

‘Don’t give me that. This might work on your doe-eyed wife who waits on you and believes you, but not me.’

Fazeen blinked. Nerves bulged on his forehead. ‘I... uh... I didn’t... You sure it is my child?’

‘Absolutely. That’s why it hunts your men. She is taking revenge from you because of what you did. You threw her away when she was a newborn. You left her to die, but she transformed into this hideous creature who is in pain and now wants to ruin you.’

‘I, uh... I had to ...’ He closed his eyes, but not a single tear was released. ‘I had to ... She was a girl.’

‘Just because she was a girl?’

‘Yes.’ He lowered his head in shame. ‘This world is no place for a girl. I tell you that. No place. Might as well nip the problem in the bud. So I told my men to do the deed and bury her.’

Sinbad scoffed, ‘This girl has apparently finished off most of your men, so you can’t say this is no place for her.’

‘Rather than mocking me, tell me what I should do. I am not fully convinced that there is indeed something like this out there and that Bilal is saying the truth.’

‘He is. Your men are paying for your sins and the deeds you committed. Just think about what you did. To your own child,’ Sinbad said with disgust. After a slight pause, he said, ‘I know how to take care of this situation. But other than the ships and all, I need another thing from you.’

‘What?’ breathed Fazeen. He realized that Sinbad was taking advantage of the desperate situation that he was in.

‘I need you to pardon Mehmood’s interest payment.’

Fazeen flared his nostrils. ‘You are getting a ship from me and a crew and you worry about a small tavern’s interest payment? Why?’

‘He’s important to me,’ Sinbad said.

‘Sure, sure, I don’t care. Just tell me what to do.’

‘Well,’ Sinbad began, ‘it involves you doing something that might disgust you.’

It was past midnight. They reached the spot.

It was close to an isolated garden where a cherry tree bloomed. Opposite the garden was a mosque where the silver light of the moon shone high and bright. Since the garden was huge, the burial spot was chosen to be in the corner so no one would find out if they ventured out to this lawn.

Sinbad, Fazeen and one of his most trusted men were there. They walked in the misty light towards the tree until they saw that ... the place of burial had been dug up.

‘How is it possible?’ Fazeen’s right-hand man said. ‘Sir, we ... we made sure no one would know. Someone...’

‘It’s not “someone”. The spirit did it,’ Sinbad said. ‘Anyway, we are lucky. It’s only on the fourteenth day of the month that it rises to haunt your men.’

‘But... but... today,’ the man muttered.

‘Not qualified in comprehending irony or sarcasm, are you? Today is the fourteenth day, so we have to be careful.’ He looked at Fazeen who was perhaps as pale as the spirit they were about to meet. ‘All you need to do is bring her to the cemetery—using your hands. You need to make sure she doesn’t wake up. Because if she does...’

‘Why... why can’t you do it?’ asked Fazeen, shivering.

‘Because I’m not her father. And I’m not the one who ... Anyway, the spirit will only rest if its family buries it in the cemetery with the proper funeral rites. Are your other men coming?’

‘Yes.’ Fazeen swallowed the lump in his throat.

‘Let’s do this then. Let’s find out where it went.’

They walked around the garden and they soon spotted it near the cherry tree. They circled the spirit-creature. Sinbad took a closer look—curled up, the creature groaned and moaned as it slept. Its snores sounded like little barks of a dog and the wheezing of an eagle. It smelled of dead rats and it had long teeth jutting out of its mouth. The putrid creature’s skin was crimson and it had long, unnaturally shaped eyes.

‘My child,’ Fazeen whispered.

‘No. The girl you got rid of,’ Sinbad said, trying to make sure that Fazeen felt guilty.

Fazeen cursed under his breath before taking the white towel from his right-hand man and picked the child up in his arms.

‘Let’s go,’ Sinbad whispered.

The three began to walk back. Sinbad was vigilant enough to pull out his sky-iron sword and keep it ready if the creature woke up.

‘Why did I do this?’ Fazeen muttered to himself. ‘Why? What kind of a father am I... that I made her into this ...?’

Sinbad wanted to say spiteful things, but he remained silent. He was aware of the status women were given in society and how horrible it was. They were always guarded and veiled when they stepped out and when they did, they were not supposed to stay out late. They were also not involved in anything other than housework like cooking, cleaning or tending to children.

Fazeen came from a conservative background and for him, a woman in this set-up was better off dead. Girls did not have a future. And since he had a criminal empire, he wanted a future heir and it couldn't be a girl.

'I let her die because she was a girl,' said Fazeen regretfully. 'I should have let her live. I shouldn't have ... I have done too many bad things, Sinbad.' Without a word, Sinbad led them towards the cemetery through the empty streets of Basra where the mist had increased. 'But I'm a murderer and I was proud of it until now... Seeing her has—'

'At least you realize now that what you did was wrong,' Sinbad said. He could see the cemetery a few yards away. 'You shouldn't get a second chance now. You don't deserve it.'

'Yes. We... can't have children again.' He shook his head and looked down.

'Probably the curse from this demon. Once you lay it to rest, ask for forgiveness and you might be blessed with a new beginning.'

Fazeen nodded.

But just then the whine of the child began.

Sinbad was this close to the cemetery when the creature woke up.

The My ling blinked.

And all three froze.

'It woke up,' Fazeen said, aghast. *1-1... What should I do?'

'Be still. Let it acknowledge you.'

'What if she kills me?'

'Not if she knows that you are going to give her peace,' Sinbad said, though he couldn't remember what Master Reis had said about what would happen if the Myling woke up in the middle of this ritual.

The Myling baby wailed and its hands and feet began to grow.

No, heavens no!

‘Run!’ Sinbad cried. ‘Put her in the grave before it actually grows bigger than you!’

As it began to mutate, they ran towards the cemetery. Zigzagging between tombstones, they rushed towards the area where Fazeen’s right-hand man had dug up a place for the Myling.

‘It’s getting too big... I can’t hold it...’ cried Fazeen as he attempted throwing the Myling away from him. The Myling, anticipating the move, clutched the man and gnawed at his arm.

Fazeen screamed in terror and tossed the Myling. As it flipped into the air, the creature grew in size mid-air, becoming bigger and bigger until it was over six feet tall. Standing on two weirdly shaped legs, the skin on its hunched body was flaming red and its eyes were immensely large orbs.

Sinbad ran between Fazeen and the creature, shielding him with his arms.

But when its eyes locked with Sinbad, the creature let out a terrible wail.

Realizing the certain doom they were facing, Fazeen cried and started shaking. ‘What have I done...’

The creature heard Fazeen’s voice and stopped crying. It turned its gaze at the man. Taking little steps, it went forward. ‘Da... daaa.’

Fazeen felt unsure but tears welled up in his eyes. ‘I’m sorry...’

The Myling’s face softened and it inched closer, arms open for an embrace. Fazeen too stepped forward slightly. ‘Forgive me, my J

Before he could finish, the creature lurched forward at him, his small mouth open and unmatched fury in its eyes. As Fazeen screamed, Sinbad

instantly brought out his sword and slashed it right across the Myling.

It slit into two halves ...

Only to get attached again in the blink of an eye. As if nothing happened.

What is going on!

Sinbad took a deep breath and sprinted towards the creature. He swiftly smacked and jabbed at the creature, but it cleverly leant back and dodged the attack. And then without warning, its long claws clashed against Sinbad's chest, throwing him back. His sword flew away from him.

Ignoring him, the creature went for Fazeen who fell to the ground, howling and begging the creature for forgiveness.

As it hurtled towards Fazeen to end his life ...

A figure appeared from the darkness, mists emanating from it. Cloaked in dark clothes, the figure attacked with a long doublesided sword, leading to a loud, horrifying mewl—till the creature reduced in size and became a small baby... but dead.

Sinbad and Fazeen stared at it, mouths agape. The short figure pulled back its cloak to reveal a young woman with purple eyes and frizzy black hair. She sheathed her double-edged sword on her back and said to Fazeen, 'Take the infant and do as you had planned.'

Fazeen nodded, still shocked. Picking up the child, he held her in his arms and took her to the burial spot. He praised and chanted the god's name and put soil on top of the baby amidst sobs. Sinbad remained frozen to the ground, his sword inches away. The purple-eyed woman walked towards him as she picked up the sword and gave it to him.

'I've been following you secretly, making sure you do everything correctly, but this time I had to intervene. Next time, when you deal with a Myling, remember that you first need to make it unconscious with a spell

and then bury it; otherwise, it wakes up,' the woman said with a cocky smirk.

Sinbad took his sword and asked, 'Who are you?'

'Idris,' the woman said. 'Your overseer.' And she winked.

TWENTY-ONE

FOUR YEARS AGO

Sinbad woke up feeling drowsy and exhausted. When he opened his eyes fully, he realized that he was in a highly elevated area on a surface that didn't feel rocky but felt like hay. A veil of mist enveloped the place. A cold chill ran down his spine.

He glanced around, trying to look for Master Reis, and he had an uncomfortable feeling that he might have met a worse fate than this. His body felt weak as he stood up, leaning on a gleaming white rock. He then saw Master Reis on the opposite side, also leaning on a white rock.

'Master? What happened?'

'She brought us here,' Master Reis said with pain in his voice. He looked pale.

'Brought us where?'

The sky was dark, but the orange blush of sunrise brightened the horizon. The smell of dead animals filled the place and Sinbad didn't know where it was coming from.

'Look around you, Sinbad. Look carefully,' Master Reis struggled to speak. 'Ugh, my guts hurt from her spell.'

Sinbad tried to get a sense of his surroundings and felt around for the hay and the rock. But he realized that what he thought was a white rock, what he was leaning on, was actually a giant egg.

In fact, what Master Reis was also leaning on was another egg and it was twice his master's height—and Reis was six feet tall.

They were in the bird's nest.

'These are the bird's eggs,' cried Reis. 'The witch brought us here so when the bird comes, it will eat us.'

Sinbad's legs felt weak as he scrambled over to the edge of the nest to peer down. He caught sight of mountains and a forest that looked incredibly tiny from above amidst the fog.

He felt an overwhelming sense of vertigo and he pulled himself back, gasping for air and hope. He fell flat on his back and stumbled upon an animal's carcase in the corner. He almost retched at the sight of it.

'What should we do, master?'

'We leave. Help me.'

Sinbad nodded as he made his way to his master and helped him stand up. Suddenly, they heard a sound from afar—the squawking of the bird.

Both of them gazed into the distance where mostly everything was obscured by the thick fog, but cutting through it was the bird with the deep brown feathers and elephant-sized talons, screeching loudly at the sight of them.

'Run!' Master Reis shouted.

He didn't have his sword.

Sinbad didn't have his rucksack. Leona stole all of it.

They ran, toppling over the nest. The bird flapped its wings and created a mighty wind, which smacked them like daggers. They raced down to the slope where on one side was wild terrain and on the other, the edge of a cliff. They stopped short.

‘We need to hide,’ Master Reis cried out.

But the bird flew close to them and was about to dart towards them, its eyes wide open...

‘Hey!’ someone shouted.

Sinbad looked at the slope’s rock wall—there was a small crack.

And there was the girl with the cat eyes.

‘Come,’ she said.

‘Master!’ Sinbad called out to him.

Reis looked at him. Sinbad pointed to the crack and said that they should go inside it.

They scurried over, making their way inside and in a jiffy, the huge beak of the bird struck at them wildly, but it couldn’t get in because the crack was too narrow.

‘Follow me,’ the girl instructed.

Sinbad nodded and all three walked through the thin walls until they reached a clearing where a small fire was lit and Sinbad noticed his book of fairy tales kept on a dirty blanket.

It could he one of her hideouts.

Master Reis walked around the clearing, intrigued.

The girl, Safeena Umair, looked at him suspiciously but exchanged smiles with Sinbad.

‘Thank you for saving us,’ he said.

‘Gratitude,’ she replied, handing him the book. ‘Good. More?’

‘Yes, I have more. Back in the compound.’

Her smile faded. ‘Compound? Evil.’

‘Yeah. They threw you out.’

‘No. They kill family. Then soldier threw me out.’ She lowered her head.

Sinbad shared a glance of confusion with Master Reis, but he signalled to Sinbad to continue.

‘But...’ Sinbad said, ‘they said they died of illnesses and accidents.’

‘Lies.’ She hissed, her cat eyes glowed. ‘All lies. Revenge must be taken.’

Sinbad didn’t know what was going on. He asked, ‘So you created this bird as an instrument of revenge?’

‘No.’ She shook her head. ‘Out of love. Kissed an injured bird. It grew into this. Tsk tsk,’ she said with sadness in her voice.

Sinbad couldn’t fathom the power this girl held if she was able to mutate this ferocious bird with just her touch.

‘Named it Roc, like rock!’ She giggled.

‘What about Leona?’

‘Who Leona?’

‘Leonard.’

‘Goat demon,’ she said, shivering. ‘Horror. Darkness. Frightens me. Makes me want to do everything I don’t want

to. Says I must train to be strong. Must use my powers rightfully. Says I should be strong to kill all those who murdered my family.’

‘But you don’t think he’s a good person?’

‘No. Evil.’

Sinbad was glad that even though she was impressionable, she understood the difference between good and evil.

‘Old nan read me stories of heroes,’ she said. ‘No hero takes life of innocents.’

‘You know why the goat demon said your parents were killed by villagers?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Why?’

‘Because he wants you to channel your powers and spread hate. It’s called black magic and it’s evil,’ he said. ‘He lied. The villagers didn’t do anything, I am sure of that.’

She was confused but nodded.

Master Reis interjected, turning to Sinbad, ‘Ask her how we can escape from here.’

‘I understand,’ the girl quickly replied, looking at him directly as if to say that she’s not an idiot. ‘From the backside.’

Reis nodded and mouthed to Sinbad, ‘Good job.’

TWENTY-TWO

PRESENT DAY

At the crack of dawn, a ship was prepared.

Sinbad had no idea that Idris had already planned everything including the transport, which is why she'd made a late yet dramatic entry. He cursed himself. While he was busy saving criminal empires to procure ships as the doomsday clock turned, Idris had already got one on the port of Umm Qasr, hired guards for it and even built a crew.

Sinbad looked at the double-masted ship in front of him on which was written 'By Fate and Fortune', as if engraved with a dagger. The ship was big enough to house over 200 people. Though he was thankful for this, he couldn't believe he had lost one precious day sorting out Fazeen's affairs.

Idris was standing beside him, cheekily grinning. For an Elder Seid, she looked quite young; perhaps she'd have been five years or so older than him. Sinbad couldn't help but admire this as it was a great achievement, especially considering the guild and their rules.

'Made of elfwood,' said Idris as they walked on the plank that acted as a bridge between the shore and the ship.

Elfwood was, in fact, not as simple as it sounded. It didn't come from the elves but from the sacred, wisdom-granting Norse tree called Yggdrasil. The dryads, who were the tree spirits, protected it, but not for long. Given the power of the Yggdrasil, the elves— warmongers and money-grabbers as they were—broke the tree into splinters to sell it around the world for great riches. Sinbad knew that the one group of people he didn't want to ever

meet were the sneaky little elves. He felt bad about the fate the Yggdrasil had met. But he also knew the power of the wood, for when used in ships by magical or gifted beings, it made the vessel ten times faster, if not more, than an ordinary one. And to undertake a journey like this one in less than seven days, it was a boon.

As Sinbad walked on the shiny, glistening wood of the ship that for some reason gave off the smell of turmeric, he felt as if he belonged here. He observed the crew that Idris had hired as they handled cargo, raw materials, the spices needed for meals and the basic necessities one needs during a long journey.

‘Cannot be destroyed so easily,’ Idris said, tapping on the wood. ‘Needs special magic.’

‘How did you know we had to sail for the seas?’

‘Oh, the guild knew that Safeena would most certainly be travelling to the seas eastwards after the great Zarqa mentioned her visions to us. So we got the best ship.’

‘Ja’far didn’t tell me.’

‘Perhaps he thought I would fill you in.’ Idris’s eyes crinkled with mischief. ‘Don’t worry, champ, let me lead you from here and we will be fine.’ She thumped Sinbad’s back patronizingly. ‘Just follow me, and when I need you, you pop up.’

Sinbad scoffed, ‘No. I’m the one who’s leading this. I risked my life to find Proteus and where Safeena went.’

‘Oh yeah, I know. I followed you there too, making sure that you were on the mission and not whiling away the hours. What did you

learn?’

‘We need to follow her aura. She smells of sulphurium, which isn’t something you can smell in the sea, so we need a good tracker.’

‘Great! We need a god and we don’t have a lot of time.’

‘No, I have a vampire friend Ashrafiyah who can help us.’

‘Does she live here?’

He shook his head. ‘She’s in Oman.’

‘We are not going there, champ. After all, Oman is a Strigoi nest,’ she said, referring to the Romanian term for vampires.

‘Ashrafiyah is a friend.’

‘Strigoi aren’t friends with mortals. Especially our kind. Also, they are paid smellers and eaters. The mortals do it for free. I don’t trust the bloodsuckers, so might as well trap a god.’

‘Gods can be dangerous.’

‘But not if we convince one to help us.’

Sinbad said firmly, ‘I know what I’m doing, Mistress Idris, and I know that we need to go and find my vampire friend.’

She looked at him, blinking. A certain fierceness blazed in her irises. ‘All right, whatever you say. The guild did say that you would be a problem since you know what happened three years ago, during the rebellion and all. Your story was quite something and we were told not to be like you. It’s strange how you are still accepted in the guild, probably because you might be useful one day. Like now.’

Sinbad didn’t say anything. She was just so ... annoying.

‘But I’m the captain of this ship,’ she added with a smile.

Sinbad gritted his teeth. ‘Sure, whatever you say, captain.’ ‘There was no point in you helping that crime lord. You could have just asked around for me. I was right there at the port.’

‘You could have come straight to me.’

‘And skipped that amazing entrance I made?’ She chuckled.

Sinbad was about to respond when he spotted dozens of African soldiers marching near the port, holding spears, gauntlets and shields. The porters and sailors got scared and gathered to see what was happening.

Even Idris looked around in confusion, scratching her head.

The soldier in the front, who was leading them, stopped and said loudly: ‘Looking for Sinbadl’

Sinbad looked at Idris and walked down the plank.

‘I’m Sinbad.’

‘We have been sent by Fazeen. He has commissioned us to serve you till death.’

These were mawalis, non-Arab slaves who worked as mercenaries.

‘Since he couldn’t repay you two for the services in the form of a ship, he has sent us.’ The Africans then all spoke in unison: ‘To Sinbad!’

‘I am Markus,’ their leader said. ‘And I can be your boat gunner.’

Sinbad looked at self-proclaimed captain Idris, who just shrugged. ‘Sure, the more the merrier. All aboard, boys!’

As they were setting sail, Sinbad was given the title of the quartermaster. The boatswain was an elderly crew member hired by Idris

who was supervising each cargo. There were weapons, catapults and support boats.

Sinbad sat in the corner eating an apple, while Husayn was busy flipping a coin. ‘Mehmood’s interest payment has been pardoned. He told me that you talked to Fazeen about it.’

‘Yep,’ Sinbad said. ‘Is he angry that we are going on a trip?’

‘Oh, he thinks we are going on an educational trip.’ Husayn burst out laughing. ‘I told him some gobbledygook to make him agree.’

‘Did you see Pressa?’

‘No, I went to say goodbye, but she wasn’t there.’

Sinbad nodded. He knew she’d be okay. He looked over at Markus who was testing out the ship’s weaponries. There were long spears that could be used to fend off enemy ships, catapults with Greek fire bombs and a lot more.

‘I don’t like the new captain,’ Sinbad said, chewing the apple roughly. ‘She reminds me of my previous master.

But he was less smiles, more action. She’s more smiles. And she hides things, I feel. I don’t know what is she hiding, but she definitely is.’

‘Well, she knows what she wants to do.’

‘She didn’t even tell me we had to go east until I mentioned it. I think she already knows a lot more than we do.’

‘You are overthinking, Sinbad,’ Husayn said. ‘Also, she’s too beautiful to do any of that.’

‘Don’t tell me you’re smitten with her.’

‘All women are beautiful and she... she is a goddess.’

‘You haven’t seen goddesses and I hope you don’t. Most of them hate humans, so...’

Husayn was starry-eyed. Sinbad shook his head and finished his apple. He tossed it in the sea as the ship became ready to depart. The planks were pulled up, and the ropes that tied the ship to the shore were untied.

Sinbad felt a little sick at the sight of the sea stretching for miles on every side of the ship. He turned his head and saw Idris walking up to them.

Husayn, still captivated by her, muttered, ‘My lady, it is my great fortune to—’

‘Can I speak to Sinbad in private?’ she interrupted with a chuckle.

Husayn looked bemused. He nodded before leaving for the lower deck.

Sinbad saw Idris towering over him. She said, ‘See, I know we don’t need to agree on everything. But I hope you agree with me on one thing.’

‘And that is?’

‘We need to kill Safeena Umair,’ she said with a placid face.

Sinbad’s blood froze. He hadn’t even thought about what Ja’far had said earlier. Other than getting the trumpet, he had to kill her as well. While the former was tough, the latter... was monumental.

‘Because she is a doomsday clock. If we don’t, this situation might arise again. She’s the Devil’s weapon and we need to kill her when the opportunity comes,’ she said with arched brows. ‘All right?’

Sinbad clenched his jaw. ‘Sure.’

‘I’m surprised, you know.’ She chuckled as she leant on a railing. ‘I’m surprised you still care about her, after what she did.’

‘What did she do?’ Sinbad looked up.

She looked at him and wondered how he did not know this in-your-face truth. ‘Your master, Sinbad.’ She paused as she reminded him of his harsh and bitter past. ‘She killed Master Reis three years ago.’

TWENTY-THREE

FOUR YEARS AGO

There were very few times in Sinbad's life that his master was proud of him, and Sinbad was glad that this was one of those moments.

As Sinbad, Master Reis and Safeena stepped out of the cave, leaving the darkness behind them, they reached another crack through which they had to wriggle. They finally came to a slope, in the open air, finding themselves on the backside of the mountain.

As they walked down the slope, Sinbad and Safeena discussed books. She couldn't speak coherently, but she told him the tale of Theseus who she really liked and he added how the Minotaur was such a formidable foe.

Sinbad knew Master Reis was keeping his ears open because he was intrigued by this conversation.

'We need to get our weapons and other stuff back,' Master Reis said.

Sinbad agreed and turned to Safeena. 'Can you guide us there?' Safeena nodded meekly. 'Can you help me too?' 'How?' Sinbad asked.

'In leaving this place. I don't like here,' she said. 'I only be with the goat demon because have no one here.'

Sinbad and Reis looked at each other. Reis knelt down, facing her and said, 'Child, I promise. Once I've dealt with the goat demon, I shall take you away from all this pain, suffering and isolation. I will make sure you

find another family where you can be happy.’ He smiled, tapping her on the head.

Safeena returned the smile, even though it came with reluctance.

Sinbad was glad that beneath the rough exterior of Master Reis, there was softness.

They reached the witch’s house.

Apparently, the girl had travelled there on foot a number of times and knew the place inside out, so that helped them in reaching the cottage as soon as possible.

When the three entered the place, it was empty. Sinbad took his rucksack that was kept on the study table and Reis took his sword and potion pouches that were all kept together.

Sinbad carefully scanned the room and felt eerie since the last time he came here, he was in danger.

As they left from the front door, the girl asked, ‘Where do you go?’

‘Back to the compound. We need to plan how to defeat the goat demon,’ Sinbad responded.

She shook her head. ‘No. No. Scary. Worse than goat demon there. Killers.’

Sinbad looked at Master Reis who nudged him to continue talking to her. ‘But where else then?’

‘Anywhere but there.’

‘Does anyone in particular who lives there hurt you?’

Her eyes shimmered and before she could say another word— ‘Oh, look at you all. A perfect family,’ the witch’s voice came. Startled, they all saw her standing on the front path, her feet apart and in an attack position. ‘I am disappointed in you, Safeena. The Lord of the Dawn expected great things from you. But you have really hurt him and me. I have put endless amounts of energy in you and you just let it all go to waste.’

Her voice was turning manlier. Her face changed, turning black and elongated like a deformed elk, and her body began to transform with the hands curling and growing longer and the feet growing shorter. The witch grew enormous wings like of a bat’s. The Black Man smiled as his skull cracked and three grotesque horns jutted out.

Master Reis pulled out his sword.

‘Let’s do this.’

TWENTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY

They all stood in the captain's cabin to discuss the plan of action.

Sinbad was in a corner, leaning against some stacks of books. Next to him was Husayn, who was playing with his coin. He saw Markus at the far end. His serious face seems so daunting, thought Sinbad. He had a nose ring as big as his nose and his muscles were ripped. Tucked into his waistband was a bronze shield in the front and a large axe at the small of his back.

Idris was sitting on a chair in the middle of the cabin.

A map was laid out in front of her along with piles of papers about vampires.

'Hope you are aware that this is no ordinary voyage, Markus,' Idris said with a smile.

'I have vanquished the son of Anansi with my bare hands, captain,' Markus said seriously.

'Son? You mean a giant spider?'

He nodded.

Anansi was a trickster god who was famous for troubling African inhabitants with his spider creatures.

'I don't fear anything in this world. Ogun Onire protects me,' he said, referring to the god of war and iron in African mythology.

‘Great!’ Idris clapped slowly as she leant back and looked at Sinbad and Husayn. ‘Well, as you know the ship is made of elfwood, which makes the course faster, so that means we are close to the Gulf of Oman and will reach Sohar a day earlier than planned. All of you know what we are going to deal with when we reach there, right?’

Sinbad clearly didn’t. He had been to Sohar a long time ago. ‘I know, but, um, refresh it for Husayn.’

Husayn grinned. ‘Yes, my lady.’

Idris shook her head, and looking only at Sinbad, she said, ‘You have planned to go and get help from your friend Ashrafiyah, but you don’t know that the Adam’s Children run around the streets of Oman, hunting down Strigoi?’

‘Adam’s Children?’ asked Husayn.

‘The vampire hunters,’ Idris added with an exasperated sigh. ‘They call themselves “Adam’s Children” since he was the husband of Lilith, the First One, before she turned out to be a vampire and Adam ostracized her, sending her to the depths of the world. Lilith, in revenge, brought a plague of the mutated Strigidae, which led to vampirism in the world.’

‘And they don’t suck blood,’ Sinbad added. ‘Common misconception. They suck your soul.’

Husayn giggled nervously. ‘How is that any better?’

‘But they do!’ Idris quickly added as if there was a verbal war going on. ‘Strigoi, like Strigoi Mort, are elder vampires and they go for blood. They can also shape-shift into their true form, but they prefer to stay in human forms—it gives them good cover.’

‘My friend, Ashrafiyah, is,’ Sinbad cut in, looking at Husayn, ‘what we call Strigoaica, which is a Clairalience Vampire—the kind that possesses the psychic power of clear smelling.’

‘Too many big words. I just want to know one thing: does she eat souls as well?’

‘Yes, but they are like humans and they can live in the sunlight. In fact, all vampires can. That’s another myth propagated because darkness is associated with evil, thus vampires also became to be associated with darkness,’ Sinbad explained. He turned to Idris and asked, ‘Do you have any plans of what we’ll do when we reach there?’

‘I suppose you should tell me how we can contact this Ashrafiyah. Any address?’

Sinbad didn’t have a clue. He gulped. ‘We can, erm...’

Idris smirked. ‘Don’t tell me you have no clue where she is. The only way I see it now is we talk to Brother Cain, the sergeant of the Adam’s Children who’s stationed in Sohar. I know him briefly and he’s a good man. He might be able to help.’

‘But they are extremists,’ Sinbad protested.

‘Do you have a better alternative?’

But before he could answer, there was a knock on the door. Idris allowed the person to come in who said, ‘Captain... there is a, uh. .. well... you need to see it for yourself.’

Sinbad and Husayn looked at each other. They got out of the cabin and went up the stairs with Markus and Idris behind them. As they reached the upper deck, they saw the crew circled around something, creating a commotion.

Sinbad pushed his way through the crowd with Husayn and they saw someone familiar, trying to squirm out of a wine barrel that had no wine.

‘Pressa,’ Sinbad sighed and shook his head when he saw the thirteen-year-old Chinese seer.

Pressa was given some water to drink. Everybody in the cabin was looking at her. She quietly sipped water and gave a giggle before saying, ‘I would have stayed longer in there, but it’s too much, ya.’ ‘Who is she?’ Idris asked Sinbad.

He said, ‘She’s a friend. And she is a seer.’

‘Oh, a very feisty one at that. The one back at the guild is old and rusty.’ Idris turned to Pressa and asked her smilingly, ‘Why are you here, child? These are dangerous waters.’

‘Girl, nothing scares me,’ Pressa said bluntly. ‘I wanted to come, but this boy,’ she said, pointing to Sinbad, ‘didn’t let me, so I thought I might as well hide in the barrel until the ship sails out to the deep waters and then reveal myself—ta-da!’ She grinned enthusiastically from ear to ear.

Sinbad expected Idris to make a retort of some kind, but instead, her purple eyes softened and she said, ‘We need your help.’

Sinbad was taken aback by this, but he remained silent and crossed his arms over his chest.

‘Sure, that’s what I’m here for,’ Pressa replied and kept the cup on the table. ‘What do you want me to see?’

Idris smiled and said, ‘I need you to tell me how we can find a woman named Ashrafiyah.’

Pressa nodded, closing her eyes.

Sinbad and Husayn watched for minutes as the towering figure of Markus stood behind them, breathing against their necks and giving them

goosebumps.

Suddenly, Pressa opened her eyes, gasping for air. She grasped the arms of the chair. ‘I saw that... Ugh... I saw that we need to go and look for some ... gods. But why was this so scary?’

‘You just saw a way to know about the child of Lilith. Lilith brings bad memories to seers, so we can only use you with rarity,’ Idris said. ‘But anyway, I hope the information you give us is enough to take us forward and not ask for your help again.’

‘All right, um,’ Pressa swallowed hard and continued, ‘I saw a red cross on a white cloth and, um... golden eyes ... shadowless ... Magnus something... that’s all I can see, to be honest.’

Idris looked at Sinbad and said, ‘The one thing I can understand from this is the red cross, and you know what they stand for. Unfortunately, Sinbad, the only way to find your vampire is to actually meet the ones who hunt her.’

And in that moment, a new worry hit him.

He wondered about the fate of his friend Ashrafiyah and if she was in the custody of the extremist, warmongering group called the Adam’s Children.

TWENTY-FIVE

FOUR YEARS AGO

Sinbad saw Reis storming towards Leonard, the Black Man.

With his sword, he gracefully sprinted and then hurled himself against the wind, slashing the blade right across the demon. But Leonard flapped his wings and instantly lurched from where he stood to jumping on Reis's back, clawing his shoulders.

Reis screamed in agony as he swished his sword aimlessly— finally managing to stab the tip of it into Leonard and hurting him to some extent.

'Horns,' Safeena said to Sinbad, looking at him in horror. 'Horns. Weakness.'

Sinbad noticed the three horns on Leonard's head that were as big as his arms. He shouted, 'Master Reis! The horns!'

Reis didn't hear him perhaps, but Leonard did for sure as he left Master Reis and flew towards Sinbad and Safeena, who were in the corner of the hut. The two made a run for it, but the Black Man was too fast for them as he flapped his leathery bat wings. From the corner of his eye, as Sinbad ran, he saw Leonard generating blue flames of energy in his palms and shooting them towards Safeena. Before he could tell her to watch out, they hit her in the chest. She toppled over to her back and collapsed, unconscious.

'No! Safeena!' Sinbad rushed to her.

But the demon lurked near Sinbad. He opened his mouth, baring his ferocious teeth that were ready to tear the flesh from Sinbad's head, but suddenly, an unseen force pushed him back and threw him on the ground with dust swirling around him.

It was Master Reis casting his telekinetic spell of pull, his gloved fingers crackling with yellowish sparks.

Sinbad checked Safeena's pulse. She was breathing softly, as if in deep sleep.

She's alive. It's like he put her to sleep so she doesn't intervene... This means... even Leonard is afraid of what she's capable...

Sinbad glanced at Master Reis and Leonard who were fighting with all their powers. Master Reis was using his sword to deflect the bat wings strategically. He then jumped in the air to stab the demon in the back.

But nothing happened as Leonard cried in pain momentarily but just shook the pain away. Immediately after, there was a thunderous roar and he flew high up in the sky.

Master Reis rushed to Sinbad and shouted, 'Look up!' Hundreds of bees were swarming around Leonard's wings ... and he directed all of them towards Sinbad and Master Reis.

The bees moved towards them in synchronized motion. Master Reis cast a spell after which a shimmering orange protective shield formed around them, averting the bees in an instant.

It was so quick and only a trained spell master could have accomplished this.

'Run!' Master Reis exclaimed.

'It's his horns, master. They're his weakness.'

Master Reis nodded, but just then in that moment of distraction, the giant goat demon instantly flew close to them, grabbing Sinbad by the neck

and pulling him up in the air, away from Master Reis and his attacks.

He took him up high and Sinbad saw the deformed elk face clearly. Red smoke began to circle around his dark eyes. The patchy fur on his body felt icky and its claws dug into Sinbad's neck.

'Leave me ...' he struggled to say, punching and kicking the demon in mid-air.

'I don't know why she likes you. Perhaps because of your humanoid appearance. I tried to be a loving mother figure to her, but she knew the real me and she was afraid of me. You spoiled her. You spoiled the Lord of the Dawn's weapon, and for that you shall never be forgiven.'

'She's innocent...' Sinbad said in a choked voice. 'You made her do horrible things.'

'Black magic isn't about unicorns and fairies, child!' The talons tightened and dug deeper. Blood began to seep out of Sinbad's skin.

He thought he'd faint when he heard—

'Sinbad! Grab it!'

It was Master Reis.

Sinbad, in dire need of help, removed a hand from Leonard's grip and caught hold of the sword that Master Reis had thrown up in his direction.

The thokcha sword!

In one quick motion, he mangled the three horns of the goat demon. He let out a high-pitched cry of horror and agony. The bat wings began to crumble.

Both of them fell to the ground. Sinbad fell head first and hit a hard surface.

He was not able to see anything for a minute. Slowly, he opened his eyes, but his vision was blurry. He took a few deep breaths and stood to his feet, and he realized that he actually fell on the demon, who acted as a cushion and probably saved his life.

The demon lay on the ground, the tongue lashed out.

Sinbad looked ahead and saw Master Reis approaching him with a smile.

‘You did it,’ he said and beamed proudly, kneeling down. Sinbad noticed that his master had as many bruises as him. ‘You did it,

Sinbad.’

And for the first time in a long time, Master Reis called Sinbad by his name.

TWENTY-SIX

PRESENT DAY

As they docked their ship, the entire city of Sohar bathed in sunlight. The locals were dressed in either white or lilac. There were several dhows, and some fishermen were showing their catches of netted fish to inspecting merchants.

The sky looked limitless. Under it were pale marble mosques and buildings adorned with cobalt blue tesserae. From a distance, the facade of the port town seemed like blocks of ivory and beige.

Sinbad was dressed in red harem pants, a black vest over a white rune-painted tunic with a stand-up collar. His black hair flew back. He stood out among the rest since everyone around him were in rather plain-looking clothes with daggers and turbaned heads. The women wore long, white gowns and headdresses, so when Idris, who was in an all-black attire, appeared, everyone stared at her.

Sohar was a prosperous town of Oman, just like Basra. The caliphate had good trading relations with the Sultanate of Oman but while the caliphate was careful about their tourism activities,

Oman wasn’t. They had kept their borders open once in the past, but that led to vampires from Rome invading their lands and then hiding in plain sight.

Pressa and Markus stayed behind on the ship, and Sinbad, Husayn and Idris set foot in the town.

They walked through the streets of the busy bazaar, noticing that frankincense was being sold in high quantities and was the leading export product here.

‘Do you know where the Adam’s Children are stationed?’ asked Sinbad.

‘Have to ask around.’

When they scanned the area, Sinbad saw an orator standing on a pedestal near a sewer. He was ringing a bell to attract children and other folks.

Sinbad nudged Husayn to walk with him while Idris went around to ask shopkeepers about the whereabouts of the Adam’s Children. As they reached the pomegranate tree that shadowed the orator, his voice boomed:

‘Listen, listen, everybody! The tales of bravery of the Adam’s Children.’ He then narrated impressive tales about the extremist Christian vampire hunters.

Husayn whispered to Sinbad, ‘How much do you think he gets paid to spread these lies? Isn’t this propaganda because you told me the Children are a horrible, fascist group of hunters?’

‘It is. But this idea of bringing orators into bustling streets has been adopted from Rome. It is highly prevalent there. Unlike the caliphate, the sultanate loves to deal with the Byzantines,’ Sinbad replied.

The orator continued, ‘The Adam’s Children are the product of the Pope who realized that there are greedy bloodsuckers out here in Oman. Teaming up with the Sultanate, the Adam’s Children have been given free rein to do what they want to do to make sure order and peace is maintained and no monsters hunt the inhabitants. And he sent his military faction to hunt them and kill them with stakes. With their powerful hawthorn weapons —made of the special wood that could kill vampires—they hunt them every day so we can all rest at night.’

Sinbad and Husayn heard a cough behind them.

They turned around and saw Idris holding a piece of parchment.

‘Paid a dealer,’ said the Elder Seid, ‘and found their address.

They operate in the heart of the city. Come.’

As they neared the fortress of the Adam’s Children, set amidst the isolated inner city, Sinbad saw deployed soldiers. Some were sharpening their hawthorn swords while some were talking among themselves. They all wore white armour, like knights, and had long, flowing black capes that bore embroidered red crosses. Sinbad noticed their unusual hawthorn swords—the ones the orator had mentioned.

Idris walked to the yellow fort’s entrance where two guards stood at attention.

One of them asked Idris, ‘How can we help you, miss?’

‘Came here to see Brother Cain. Tell him Mistress Idris from the Ninurta Guild is here. He knows me,’ Idris said.

‘Brother Cain?’ one of the guards asked. ‘All right, miss.’ A guard went inside while they waited.

Sinbad asked, ‘What is this Brother Cain like?’

‘A pretty sober man,’ said Idris. ‘He doesn’t like to beat around the bush and he hates socializing. Has a penchant for musicians and loves a good song.’

‘Well, then we have something in common.’ Husayn chuckled.

‘And he loves his job and hates Strigoi. Like hates,’ Idris added. ‘I have heard how he has driven stakes through more than a hundred of them. One of the strongest hunters out there.’

‘I hope Ashrafiyah isn’t one of them, otherwise we have lost our only lead.’

The guard returned and asked them to follow him inside.

As they did, Sinbad carefully looked around and saw that the Brothers were sword fighting, while others were wrestling. There were multicoloured tinted windows. They reached a small courtyard that was occupied by bushes. The guard opened a door and all of them entered some sort of a prison cell, where in stark contrast were flowerpots kept in the corners.

And in one such corner was a tall man with a large head, his back facing them. He was kneeling next to a pot and smelling a flower.

Beside the man was a Strigoi.

Deep red veins bulged under its whitish skin. The hair was pitch-black and the incisors were too big for its own mouth. It was chained to the wall and had several burnt marks on its body.

Sinbad wondered whether Brother Cain had kept Ashrafiyah like this, but he brushed aside the thought.

After smelling the flower, Brother Cain tore the petals off and walked towards the Strigoi. The whimpering vampire was scared and almost in tears, but Cain didn’t bother. He opened its mouth with his gauntlet-covered hands and stuffed the petals inside the Strigoi’s mouth, letting them rest there.

The vampire wailed and burnt. Fumes of smoke rose as the light in him died.

‘Woo-hoo!’ Brother Cain clapped his hands joyfully as he turned back.

Sinbad noticed his golden eyes.

This is what Pressa saw.

‘To what do I owe the pleasure of meeting the Seids?’ he asked in a slick Roman accent.

Cain was, no doubt, a handsome man. But his smile, even though it was warm and joyful, seemed eerie and sadistic to Sinbad.

‘Here to talk about a vampire. Ashrafiyah. Hope you know her.’

Brother Cain’s smile wavered. ‘Of course, I do. But why is an elder hunter searching for her?’

‘It’s me,’ Sinbad said. ‘I know her personally. She’s a friend.’

‘Come on, Cain, spit it out,’ Idris said.

Cain walked away from the dead Strigoi, washed his gauntlets under the tap nearby and knelt down to wash his face as well. The cell was smelly and there were rats in it, but Cain didn’t seem to care. ‘You know, I am quite excited you lot are here.’ He got to his feet and walked towards Sinbad and Husayn. ‘Are both of you hunters too?’

Husayn shook his head.

Sinbad didn’t say a word.

‘Ah, so you are.’ Cain smiled at Sinbad. ‘I’m Brother Cain.

Pleasure meeting you.’

‘Sinbad.’

‘Great, Sinbad.’ He turned to Idris. ‘The Seids are quite helpful and strong since their physiology is put to test by drinking different potions all the time. Aren’t they? And they aren’t like us mortals. They are more superior. Tell you what. I have a job for you two.’

‘We are not here to be commissioned,’ Sinbad snapped.

‘And you thought I will spill information just like that?’ Cain snapped his fingers, smiling. ‘But I shall still do it. Ashrafiyah is at the palace that belongs to the Strigoi Mort named Magnus of Constanta. He was a baron in Rome, but he escaped and came here and now hurts people. That’s where she is right now.’

‘How do you know?’ Idris asked.

‘She has worked for me as a spy.’

Idris chuckled. ‘Brother Cain taking help from a vampire.

Sounds strange.’

‘Desperate times call for desperate measures. But you will not be able to help her.’ Cain shrugged.

Sinbad clenched his fist. ‘Why?’

‘Because she’s surrounded by over a hundred Strigoi. And the only person who can help her is, well, me. I can storm in there, demolish the bastion and bring her out. But my hands are tied, for if I do rescue her, there’s a risk of losing what she was supposed to acquire as a spy.’

‘What do you want us to do?’

‘There’s a wedding happening in the palace. The creepers are celebrating a union, of all things!’ he sniggered, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. ‘They have invited Strigoi from all over the world. So, here’s what I want: tell them you are Ashrafiyah’s friends—well, this kid actually is—and meet her. Gather the intel she possesses and bring it back to me and

I shall tear down the castle and get you Ashrafiyah,’ he said. ‘That’s a no-brainer.’

‘What if, in getting the intel, we get Ashrafiyah out as well?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Impossible. You’ll know why,’ Cain said. ‘Do we have a deal?’ Sinbad didn’t seem to listen to the last part. ‘What’s the intel?’ ‘Something that might hurt Magnus. Something I need.

Anything else?’ Cain asked.

Idris said, ‘Why us?’

‘Because you are Seids. You are welcomed everywhere, even at a stupid vampire wedding as long as you have no intentions of hurting them.’ He smiled and one could sense his impatience and greed.

‘I don’t trust you,’ Sinbad said flatly.

‘Ouch.’ Brother Cain massaged the right side of his chest dramatically. ‘That hurt. Idris, be a darling and let him know how trustworthy I am and how I always keep my word because you know whatever happened with you, I was there to help.’

Sinbad looked at Idris, who had an impassive expression.

‘Fine. Let’s do this,’ Idris said, ignoring Sinbad’s startled gaze.

‘Great. Once you are done, meet me at the Adam’s Children outpost in Rub’ al Khali desert,’ he said and stepped out, passing by a lantern where a bright light beamed over him.

And Sinbad noticed something.

Brother Cain did not have a shadow.

TWENTY-SEVEN

FOUR YEARS AGO

Sinbad knew one of them worked for the witch.

But he didn’t know who.

Through the corner of the dirty glass pane, he peered at Captain Abdul and Commander Qasim. There was a crowd gathered outside that was composed of a lot of inquisitive villagers. Standing with his back to the window was Master Reis, who was trying to make them understand why he had brought the Devil’s weapon to their compound.

‘You need to kill her!’ one of the villagers cried.

Sinbad felt his blood freeze as he glanced at his new friend Safeena, who calmly lay on his bed, dozing. After Leonard cast the spell that hurt her, she hadn’t woken up. Master Reis had assured Sinbad that she’d be fine. He had used some oils on her and told him not to worry.

Qasim added, ‘Yes, master. I believe we should take her out to the forest and get rid of her.’

Sinbad heard the commander outside and he couldn’t feel worse. He wanted to get rid of him instead.

‘We have to keep her!’ exclaimed Reis. ‘I told you, I’ve talked to the demon from the hell and have promised you she does not have a hand in it.’

Sinbad knew he was lying.

As Sinbad kept thinking about this, his eyes felt heavy and he closed them. When he woke up, he found himself in a dark room and the lanterns were unlit.

He looked outside again and no one was there. He scanned the room for Master Reis, but he wasn't here either. Probably going around the compound to put up some protective charms.

Sinbad heard soft moaning from the other side of the room and he crawled over there to see Safeena waking up and looking at him, innocent and childlike.

'Hey,' Sinbad said softly.

Safeena was alarmed for a moment. Then she calmed down and asked: 'Where?'

'You are safe.' He didn't want to tell her they were at the compound.

'Bed. Why bed?'

'Don't worry. We are figuring out a way to escape from this island,' he said with the utmost sincerity even though he had no idea what Master Reis was up to.

He looked outside, where the silver light danced, pouring in through the window. It was the night of the day of the fight with the demon—something that made Sinbad feel brave.

'The goat demon?' Safeena asked.

'I killed him.'

Her eyes widened. 'Whoa.' She patted him on the head as if to praise him.

'What is this? I'm not a dog.'

‘No.’ She giggled. ‘I do this to animal friends when they play with me. Used to. Roc...’ Her eyes dimmed with sadness.

‘Safeena, don’t think about it... Tell me what you know about the villagers.’

She shook her head and tears trickled down her cheeks. ‘They murder my family... Why? I wish I knew. Don’t know.’

‘Did you see them do it?’

She shook her head.

‘Then how do you know they did it?’

‘The captain told me.’

Sinbad arched his brows. This is important information. ‘You mean Captain Abdul?’

‘Don’t know his name.’

Sinbad opened his mouth to speak, but the door creaked open.

They both turned their heads and Sinbad saw a familiar figure with a broad face and a robust physique entering inside.

It was Captain Abdul and he had a sword in his hand.

‘I shall gut you and my worries shall soon be over,’ the captain cried out. ‘I have made sure your master is engaged with my boss while I make sure this accident takes place.’

Horrified, Sinbad looked at the man, whose gaze wasn’t directed at Safeena but him.

Safeena whimpered, ‘You took me to the compound?

I told not. It’s dangerous for me here.’

Sinbad felt his stomach knot at the fact that he had betrayed her, but before he could say anything, Abdul lurched forward at him. Sinbad rolled over.

Abdul readied his sword and tried to jab at him, the blade striking the wooden floor and causing cracks to fling apart. Frantically, Sinbad pushed himself back. In the silver gleam of light and because of his bloodshot eyes, Abdul almost looked like the personification of wrath.

A candlestick fell in the corner and Sinbad hurriedly picked it up. The moment Abdul made another strike, Sinbad brought the holder forward, parrying the attack with it.

‘I don’t know what she sees in you,’ Abdul growled. ‘But you are a distraction and a distraction needs to be distracted.’

Another thrust of the sword, and this time it hurt Sinbad as the sharp end scraped his legs. He tried to stagger away, limping, but

Abdul towered over him, glowering.

And Sinbad realized something. ‘You work for Iblis or Leonard?’

Abdul paused for a moment, confused.

Without letting the opportunity escape, Sinbad instantly kicked the captain between his legs.

Abdul’s face screwed up in agony before he fell to the ground, clutching his groin. But he didn’t let go of his blade. His face was red. He got up again as he tried to slash at Sinbad, who smacked Abdul on the head with the candlestick using all his might.

The captain dropped to the ground, bleeding.

Sinbad tried to gather his breath and his wits. So, Captain Abdul was the insider who was helping out Leonard. Did he work for Iblis as well? A mortal follower? Safeena!

He looked around, frantically searching for her in the darkness of the room, when he realized the hard truth.

She had run away.

TWENTY-EIGHT

PRESENT DAY

They were in the Rub' al Khali desert.

The heat did not feel as intense since it was almost night-time, but it was the chilly weather that got to him.

Sitting atop a horse, the breeze hit his face and Sinbad wrapped a shawl around himself. Next to him was Idris on another horse, her face covered with a scarf, and even though she must have been feeling the chill in the air, Sinbad couldn't see any sign of it. Not even a wince.

They were reaching the coordinates. But all through, there was silence between them. Sinbad had wanted Husayn to come along, but it was impossible as this was a vampire nest and vampires fed on humans. Sinbad had to explain to an upset Husayn that Strigoi or vampires didn't feed on Seids, for their souls were apparently tainted after being subjected to too many potions, different spells and a whole lot of other things. In fact, they stayed far away from them as Seids were a health hazard for them.

They halted and Idris pulled out her spyglass to search for signs of life in the vast desert wasteland with an oasis every 500 yards.

'How do you know Brother Cain?' Sinbad asked.

'None of your business.'

'I don't trust him. He said that I should talk to you for reassurance. So, tell me.'

Idris looked at him, her purple eyes piercing into Sinbad's soul. 'I can vouch for him. He keeps his word. I promise you that.'

'Why were you against Strigoi in the first place when you knew approaching them would be easier than getting a god?' Sinbad raised his brow. 'To tame a god can take at least three to five days, and I'm not talking about the small-time archaic god of water. What are you trying to run away from?'

'The past,' she responded bluntly. 'Though there are just... well, now almost four days left before the world ends, so if this chit-chat is done, we better pick up the pace.'

Sinbad shoulders heaved. 'Fine. Lead the way.'

He could see it. And clearly, it wasn't a nest in any way.

What stood in front of him were large mountains and castles made of sandstone and mortar.

As they went closer, Sinbad heard the sounds of trumpets and drums. He then saw iron grille gates that were guarded on each side by two Strigoi dressed in all black. And dozens of people, dressed exquisitely, riding their horses and camels were going inside.

'Well, this is fancy,' Sinbad said.

'This is not what I expected. A Strigoi wedding. How about that, eh?' Idris smiled. Sinbad did too. It was good to see Idris smiling, since she hadn't done it for a while now.

They reached the gates, passing by some Strigoi travellers who were mostly harmless. There were carriages and caravans coming up behind them too.

The guards looked at Sinbad and Idris.

‘Invitation?’ one of them asked, his accent thick but not husky. Just foreign.

If Sinbad hadn’t known that they sucked souls out of mortals, he’d thought of these two as any other human.

‘We aren’t Strigoi,’ said Idris. ‘We are Seids.’

The guard smelled them and grunted. He looked at the other one and said, ‘What should we do about them?’

‘Nothing,’ Idris charmingly answered before the other vampire could. ‘I bring here my presence for I wish to congratulate Magnus of Constanta for the wedding. We are guests of someone he knows here—Ashrafiyah.’

The guards looked at each other.

One of them said, ‘Might as well take you to the lady—who shall we say is visiting?’

‘Sinbad and Idris.’

He nodded. While one guard remained there to welcome other guests, the other guard took them inside, telling them to dismount from their mares and follow him on the steep paths of the castles.

Sinbad and Idris walked together as glorious music and the smell of food filled the air. There were breads and wine of all kinds. There were Strigoi kids jumping around fountains, wishing wells and grand flower displays. Ushers scrambled about to make sure everything was in order, while jugglers and dancers entertained the audience with their performances. This was an absolute extravaganza and, for a moment,

Sinbad wanted to stay and soak in the ambience of the place. The starry sky never looked prettier and the air never felt so fresh.

‘I don’t know what Ashrafiyah spied as. Maybe a barmaid,’ Sinbad said to Idris.

‘Well, she’s close enough to Magnus to get the intel, so she must be someone important. Maybe a handmaid? An adviser?’ Idris said, as a group of handsome vampires passed by her. ‘Ah, brings back memories.’

Sinbad peered at her from the corner of his eye. ‘While travelling, I did think of some theories.’

‘What?’

‘You had some relations with a male vampire, which is why you knew about the Strigoi and about Brother Cain. And this vampire betrayed you or something.’

She gave him a stern glance. ‘Don’t say things you don’t know about. And why are you so interested in my past?’

‘Because we are going on a save-the-world mission—might as well get to know each other.’ Sinbad cheekily smiled.

‘You are a pain in the ass,’ she grunted irritably.

Sinbad smirked and looked around. He saw thousands of vampires and he realized why Brother Cain had said that it will be impossible to get Ashrafiyah out.

But she can still sneak out.

Sinbad saw a group of vibrantly dressed Strigoi as they reached the gallery. Surrounded by flowerpots, it was the area at the far end that was brimming with Strigoi and where the royal couple sat on their thrones, high on a pedestal, meeting the guests.

Sinbad and Idris went forward with the guard, passing through the crowd who sniffed and glared at them with keen eyes and talked among themselves.

They finally reached the front and stood before the royal couple.

Sinbad first saw the baron.

Magnus of Constanta was a short man. His deep brown hair was slicked back. He had coal-black eyes, a gaunt face and a scar across his right cheek. He was adorned with gold and a magnificent full-length coat. Their thrones were embellished with gleaming red rubies. The soon-to-be baroness fiddled with a goblet. Her face was hidden because of an abnormally long hat from which dangled an exquisite veil made of rubies.

‘We want to see Ashrafiyah,’ Idris reminded the guard, who paid no heed to her as if meeting the royal couple was the topmost priority for every guest before getting down to their personal business.

The guard said to the baron, ‘My lord, I bring thee two Seids who say they are friends of Lady Ashrafiyah.’

Cold-eyed Magnus stared at Sinbad and Idris.

The music began playing.

And at that moment, the baron turned to his fiance and whispered something. She moved her ruby veil and looked at Sinbad.

There was a glint of joy in her eyes.

It was Ashrafiyah.

The soon-to-be baroness.

TWENTY-NINE

FOUR YEARS AGO

He didn’t know where his fate lay.

Sinbad stood in the middle of a gathering of the villagers. It was just near sundown.

The death of Captain Abdul last night was a tragedy for the villagers as well as Commander Qasim, who blamed it on the devilgirl who had escaped. They were all up in arms. It was then that Sinbad put it on himself. That he was the one who defended himself because Captain Abdul tried to kill them.

He explained the actual reason to Master Reis who deduced that Abdul was a mortal servant of the Lord of the Dawn.

But that didn’t help the situation, for he was stuck in between the villagers and the army men who eyed Sinbad with hatred. Master Reis couldn’t just spill out the detail that Abdul worked for the Devil. No one would believe that.

Commander Qasim spoke up as he looked at Master Reis, ‘The punishment for killing an officer is execution. Be it a child or an adult, the execution shall prevail.’

Master Reis intervened, ‘It was an act of self-defence.’

‘It doesn’t matter. He shall be hanged,’ Qasim announced. ‘Or stoned to death.’

Sinbad shuddered at the words.

Master Reis remained quiet. And after a slight pause, he said, ‘if you do that, I shall leave and then you can deal with the bird yourself.’

‘You don’t think we’ll simply let go of this boy,’ Qasim said, grabbing Sinbad by the collar roughly. Sinbad had never received such hatred from the usually calm and warm Qasim. ‘He deserves death.’

‘He deserves nothing but a fair trial in the court of Baghdad,’ said Master Reis, stalling for time.

‘I don’t know when we will go there. And whether we will go there. You came here to this island to kill the bird, but we instead have a rabbi and an officer who died at the hands of this boy,’ Qasim spat.

‘And that witch has escaped!’ a villager shouted.

‘She’s just a girl,’ snapped Master Reis. ‘I have told you all many times, she’s innocent.’

‘Then why is it that, wherever she goes, she brings death, like we’re seeing now?’ asked another villager.

Master Reis had no response.

Sinbad remained still and Qasim said, ‘We are going to stone him and if you try to intervene, my men will kill you.’ On cue, his dozen or so armour-clad men stood behind him.

Master Reis folded his arms. He nodded and said, ‘All right. Let him die. I’ll get another ward.’

What? Sinbad’s legs wobbled. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

‘But not this way. Not stoning. Put him out in the dark where the bird can take him. if fates allow, he shall wander and die of starvation. If not, the bird shall get him. Seems fair?’ Master Reis asked.

Qasim chuckled. ‘What a master! You are a cruel man choosing a crueller fate for your own apprentice.’

Master Reis was impassive at this remark.

‘All right,’ Qasim said. ‘Push him out when the darkness comes.’ And looking at Sinbad with deeply menacing eyes, he said, ‘You shall soon be dead.’

‘I don’t feel good,’ Sinbad said as he stood outside the gates of the compound with Master Reis.

Qasim’s men were with them, just in case Reis did something fishy. But stern-faced Reis had no such plans. He knelt down and looking straight into Sinbad’s eyes, he said, ‘I know you’ll survive the darkness and this island.’

Sinbad shook his head. ‘I can’t. Why don’t you come with me?’

‘I can’t. I shouldn’t. You have to someday learn to live on your own. Just trust me. I know what I’m doing by sending you out. if my plan works, you’ll be alive and the bird will be dead.’

‘And if not?’

He didn’t say anything and lowered his gaze.

‘And... what if I don’t find her? What if the bird hunts me down? I have no weapons.’

‘You are a Seid,’ he said. ‘Remember our motto—knowledge is our blade. Knowledge is our power. Knowledge is our armour. You don’t need

weapons.’

Sinbad had forgotten about it, but hearing it now made him feel stronger. He realized that this plan was like him being pushed out of Master Reis’s safety net into the real world.

And even though it made him uncomfortable and a little scared, he decided he was ready.

And even if he wasn’t, he had to be.

He had no choice.

Master Reis patted him on the shoulder and then left. Qasim’s guards left after him. And then the doors closed, the lights from the compound died out.

Sinbad looked ahead at the forest.

It was chilly. Misty.

And worse, he could hear wolves howling.

THIRTY

PRESENT DAY

She was playing it cool.

Ashrafiyah, smiling and waving to people around her, grabbed Sinbad's hand and pulled him away from the crowd. When they were some distance away and out of sight, she instantly hugged him. She had deep, rich black hair that fell over her shoulders, and her eyes were the colour of seaweed. She was in outrageously big clothes that hung loosely on her petite frame, and by the look of her, she seemed to be around Sinbad's age, but in fact was more than a hundred years old.

Idris stood in a corner and snickered, enjoying the drama.

Sinbad, though, was just really confused about what was happening.

'What on seven garlic hells are you doing here?' Ashrafiyah asked in her foreign accent that was a mix of Roman and Arabic, pulling back.

Sinbad noticed that she was clearly restless and anxious, probably a little tipsy from the goblet of wine she was holding. And her cheeks were scarlet red. 'Thought you'll be in danger or something. But apparently, you are the guest of honour.' He grimaced, glancing back at the baron, who was seated on his throne and was shooting suspicious glances at them repeatedly.

'Not by choice, mind you. I'm stuck here, Sinbad.' She looked at Idris and asked him, 'Is she your new girlfriend? Hey, just because the thing

between us ended doesn’t mean you frolic like a... like a ...’ She let out a laugh.

Idris had a wide smile. ‘Hold on, you two were together?’

Sinbad gritted his teeth. He hadn’t wanted that to be revealed.

‘Just for a brief time.’

‘It was so lovely!’ Ashrafiyah exclaimed, clapping her hands. ‘I met him when he was just a little younger, around ten years old, and we wrote each other letters. It was a friendship that blossomed into a relationship when he turned thirteen. I took care of him then... when it happened. I was there. Oh, poor thing! But alas, our story had to come to an end like all great love stories do. He realized I would live on forever and his love is mortal.’ She then paused, casting an apprehensive glance at Idris. ‘So, who are you?’

‘His guardian.’ Idris chuckled.

‘More like a babysitter,’ Sinbad spat. He didn’t like how dramatic Ashrafiyah was being. She was the one who had been in love with him; he’d always thought of her as a friend. But he didn’t want to say that now. ‘Ash, why are you getting married to the baron?’

‘Well, because he fancies me,’ Ashrafiyah said. ‘And

I kinda like him.’

‘I came here to take you away.’

‘And beat a few hundred vampires along the way? Magnus is very careful. He keeps me under guard all the time,’ she said, grunting. ‘Protective man, you know. Quite suffocating though. I was supposed to be here to gather intel, but soon ended up being his muse. Love—you never how it’ll happen and with whom.’

Sinbad saw the vampire soldiers closing in around them while trying to act casual. He muttered under his breath, ‘Fine. Brother Cain will help

you then. He sent us, by the way.'

'Oooh!' She clapped her hands again. 'Tell you what, I have what he needs.' She looked around dramatically before adjusting her hat and pulling out a small sheaf of parchment from it.

She thrust it at Sinbad's chest and continued with seriousness in her voice, 'Take it to him. And please, please tell him to hurry. I know for sure that I can't be with the baron. He's scary.'

'How scary?' Sinbad asked.

'Oh, he changes shape and all. Weird guy. He's an old vampire, very old.' She trembled inwardly.

'What is in this?' Sinbad asked, holding up the parchment.

'I think it's a list of chemical ingredients to turn a Dhampir back into a human. Weird stuff; wonder why Brother Cain needs it, but I don't care. I just want my coin and then to live my life with freedom.' Ashrafiyah smiled.

'Fine,' Sinbad said. 'Also, I need to hire you to smell your way through the seven seas and help us save the world.'

Ashrafiyah looked at Sinbad for a moment and gave him a goofy grin. 'Oh, what a charming proposal. And even presented so well. Lemme think about it. But I have to go now. As you know, my darling husband-to-be is a little ...' She held Idris's hand and said, 'You stay with me.'

Idris shook her head, bewildered at this sudden request. 'I can't.' 'Well, you have to,' Ashrafiyah said. 'The baron and his men might suspect why the only two guests of mine in this wedding had come and left immediately. First of all, it's considered rude. Second of all, he would second-guess the both of you and do something to hurt us—and by us, I mean you two since he loves me too much and I'm sure he thinks of you two as nobodies.' Sinbad couldn't help but smile. Though Ashrafiyah was

dazed, she was making some very good points. ‘He’s a careful man, very careful. So stay, woman.’

Idris glanced at Sinbad. ‘Be quick then,’ she said through gritted teeth.

‘I’ll try.’ Sinbad smirked. ‘Or I might take longer, just for fun.’

‘Don’t test my patience, kid,’ Idris said as she was whisked away by Ashrafiyah towards the dance floor.

‘Oh, too late, already on it,’ Sinbad said and he ran away.

And while he did, his eyes met the baron’s from afar.

The vampire’s icy glance sent shivers down Sinbad’s spine.

Sinbad rode back.

His mare’s hooves thumped loudly into the thick sand, leaving prints behind as he rushed towards the city of Sohar.

Sinbad turned around and saw silhouettes rushing towards him, slowly and meticulously.

They were just shadows.

Or were they?

Did the baron send his men after him?

THIRTY-ONE

FOUR YEARS AGO

This felt like an actual punishment, rather than an opportunity to find Safeena.

With fear following each of his steps, Sinbad walked towards the depths of the dark forest. It had started raining heavily, accompanied by thunderstorm and lightning.

The rain pellets stung his face. Everything was cold and wet. Sinbad shivered. He could sense that someone was following him, but whenever he turned, there would be no one.

He could hear the loud squawks of the bird in the background. They echoed in his ears.

Sinbad sat under the dense canopy of apple trees, sheltering himself from the rain. His stomach gurgled out of hunger, so he jumped up, grabbed a fruit and took a big bite.

He then took a fallen branch and with a rock began to scrape its edges to make it sharp, so he could use it as a weapon.

The bird’s horrific screeching was heard and his heart skipped a beat.

Sinbad heard another gurgling sound erupting from his stomach. But there was nothing and no one around, only darkness. He thought it would be best if he just slept.

I have to find her as well.

But the rain fell in pounding sheets. It would be too difficult to track Safeena now. Perhaps tomorrow then. As he laid down and curled up into a ball, he heard something: heavy breathing.

Sinbad slowly got up and saw an animal standing only inches away from him. It had black and grey fur and raised ears.

A wolf.

His heart skipped several beats as the wolf sniffed loudly.

He wanted to move, but he was frozen in place, hoping that the wolf would not attack him.

And then, he saw more of them approaching him—near his legs.

The pack sniffed him, all probably wondering who'd be the first to chew the leg off him, for they were carnivores who loved to eat fresh meat.

And just before he could react, a wolf growled.

Sinbad knew he had to make a run for it. Seeing a clearing, he bolted and dead leaves flew into the air. He didn't want to look back as he sprinted for his life with his heart in his mouth.

He felt the wet ground beneath his feet, the muddiness sticking to his sandals. The stormy wind lashed at his face.

Sinbad had the sharp branch in his hand.

Did I manage to escape from them?

He stopped running and walked into the swirling mist that was really like a cloud of mystery for him—whether any wolves come out of it or not.

But they did. One by one. All growling. All ravenous.

Sinbad prepared himself.

Let’s do this.

The wolf snarled.

Great. I’m going to die.

The earth quaked. He felt something behind him, shielding him, as if something had come to his rescue.

The wolves in front began to whimper and cower and disappeared in the mist.

All right. What Just happened?

He turned around.

It was Safeena’s dear pet Roc—the giant man-eating bird.

THIRTY-TWO

PRESENT DAY

As he rode close to the outpost, Sinbad saw the fortress, which was glowing in the dark from the fire torches that decorated the ancient walls. There were spiked barricades and guards posted everywhere to make sure no Strigoi entered.

He saw Brother Cain standing outside and discussing something with his soldiers. He saw Sinbad and waved to him like a friend.

Sinbad was this close to reaching the gate when he felt there was someone behind him.

He turned around his mare to see many pairs of eyes gleaming in the darkness—the vampires had followed him on horseback.

Sinbad pulled out his sky-iron sword.

Eerie smiles crept on their faces. They turned their horses and headed back in the direction they'd come from.

Brother Cain walked to Sinbad, his eyes fixed on the Strigoi.

'Stop them,' Sinbad said. 'Otherwise they'll tell the baron that I work for you along with Idris and Ashrafiyah.'

Cain said, 'Sure, sure. Don't worry, my men will take care of it. Did you bring the intel?'

Sinbad nodded, a little uncertain and disturbed by what had just taken place.

‘Great. Let’s go.’ He smiled as he walked back into the fortress and the gates closed.

And as Sinbad entered the heavily guarded fortress, he couldn’t help but wonder why he couldn’t see any of Cain’s men going out into the night after the vampires.

Sinbad was in Cain’s study.

There were books and documents scattered on a table and shelves filled with hardbacks. Several potted plants lined a wall and Cain kept smelling them as if the scent made him experience ecstasy. He would water them from time to time from his terracotta jar, just as he did after entering the room.

Sinbad calmly sat on the chair near the table. ‘Did you send your men? I really don’t want my friends to get caught.’

‘Relax, Sinbad. Though it is unfortunate that Idris didn’t return with you,’ he said while he carefully caressed a leaf of a plant. ‘Why is that?’

Sinbad explained what had taken place at the vampire wedding and how they met Ashrafiyah. Cain chuckled and said, ‘Always one step ahead of the curve, that little girl. I so wish she wasn’t a Strigoi, otherwise I would have adopted her.’

‘You don’t have children?’ Sinbad asked, brows up. ‘You are awfully old, though,’ he added mockingly.

‘Thanks for noticing,’ the sergeant said calmly as he walked to his chair and sat down. ‘I can’t have children.’

‘Why?’

There was a hint of sadness on his face, but he shrugged it off, saying, ‘My job demands me to be absolutely committed to one thing, and that is killing these soul suckers.’

Sinbad noticed a ring on Cain’s ring finger but didn’t react. He was married. And he was lying.

‘So where is it?’ With a gleam in his eyes, Cain leant forward.

Sinbad pulled out the parchment but held on to it. ‘Why did you want a formula of turning a Dhampir into a human?’

Cain’s golden irises locked on to his. ‘It’s simple. If a Dhampir— who is the offspring of a vampire and a human—can turn back into a human, so can a full-blown Strigoi. We just want to test and mutate this. And voila! We will get a cure to this terrible, agonizing illness.’

Hypocrite. Sinbad had lived long enough in Basra, which is riddled with lies, and seen enough of Husayn’s acting skills to know when someone wasn’t being truthful.

‘Actually, the vampires I saw seem to be pretty happy with their lives,’ Sinbad said.

‘I’m sure. But unlike the Seids, we don’t wait around.’ Cain smirked. ‘We kill them while we have the chance. Your guild, on the other hand, lets any kind of monster live as long as they don’t get into their business. Quite magnanimous. But nip it in the bud is what I say.’ Sinbad didn’t want to argue. He tossed the parchment over to Cain, who grabbed it with feverish delight and began reading it.

‘Can we now go rescue Idris and Ashrafiyah?’ Sinbad spoke again. ‘The vampires would have reached the castle already.’

While keeping his eyes set on the parchment, Cain said, ‘I’m so sad that Idris didn’t come back with you. That poor lady has gone through a lot. Had a husband, who turned into one of these abominations. She still tried to live with him, but things didn’t work out, of course. In fact, I was hunting her husband and so was the guild, who didn’t want their talented, priceless hunter to be living with a soul eater. Bad press. As you might have guessed, things ended badly.’

‘You killed her husband?’

‘Oh, no, no.’ He sniggered. ‘I wish. We made a deal, so

I backed off.’

‘What did she give you in the deal?’

‘An important weapon. Don’t worry about it. I keep doing trade with people,’ Cain said with a thin smile. ‘Anyway, we backed off, but the guild got to her and separated her from her husband. They put him in prison as punishment and since they didn’t want to let their talented prodigy slip through their fingers, they told her to prove herself to be worthy enough to get her lover released.’

Sinbad’s heart sunk. All this while he had been thinking that she was betrayed by a Strigoi and hence didn’t want to work with them, when in fact she was trying to save the world along with saving her husband... from the guild! Sinbad felt a sudden urgency overcome him and he blurted, ‘We need to rescue her and Ashrafiyah. Let’s go.’

‘Ugh.’ Cain shook his head as he stood up and wore his cape that hung in the corner. ‘I wish we could. But me and my men, we have other plans.’

Sinbad arched his brows. ‘I thought we had a deal.’

‘And I broke it.’ He laughed. ‘No big deal.’

Sinbad stood up, drawing his weapon. ‘You promised me that you’ll help Ashrafiyah out.’

At that moment, the Adam’s Children entered the study, holding crossbows in their hands—all pointed at Sinbad.

Cain stood next to Sinbad and said, ‘I wish I could have helped. Ashrafiyah was useful, but that castle is a nest of over a thousand vampires. It’s the perfect time to well... burn it to ashes. And let the thousand voices wail in pain.’ He laughed. ‘A fitting gift for a wedding. What a sight it would be, and I’ll be sitting in the front row to witness it all.’ He then looked at a guard and said sternly, ‘Put him in the cell.’ The guard immediately came forward to take Sinbad’s sword and then tied his hands with a rope behind his back.

‘And I thought Idris was right about you. That you could be trusted.’ Sinbad spat at Cain.

‘Take him away. Make sure he’s unhurt,’ Cain said, emotionless. ‘After all, we have other plans for him.’

Sinbad shot him a look as he was being taken out. ‘What? You—’ ‘One. Addressing your accusation, I am a reliable man...

sometimes,’ Cain said while he was about to close the door behind him. ‘Two. There is someone who actually requested and paid me to hold you back. I was supposed to do that earlier in the day itself since I was told by this person that you’d be coming to meet me, but then I thought what the heck, might as well make some use of two Seids. I would have let you go in another scenario, but this person is very important. Crucial, in fact. And he wants you locked up for a few days till he makes an appearance in front of you.’

And then he closed the door, making Sinbad wonder who this someone was.

THIRTY-THREE

FOUR YEARS AGO

Sinbad fell flat on the wet ground.

His eyes peered into the bird’s, which gawked at him suspiciously—its big wings, unmoving but still spread out. Every single feather on the bird’s face looked so clear.

Sinbad wanted to move, but if he did, the bird might make a move.

He checked to see if he still had his weapon. It was pinned under his arm.

The bird made a wheezing sound, as if coughing.

It opened its beak. And without warning, it charged towards Sinbad.

His eyes grew big. Sinbad grabbed the sharp stick and skittered over to where the wolves had gone. This time, though, the wolves were running ahead of him... and away from him as the bird kept stomping its feet on the ground, chasing Sinbad. Its claws dug deep into the terrain of the island, leaving large footprints. Sinbad looked back, leaping into frantic action as the bird devoured each piece of tree that came in its way. The rain didn’t help either as the ground underneath was slippery. Sinbad kept skidding and falling to the muddy floor as he made his way through the forest—his body throbbing with exhaustion.

The bird squawked as it took to the air in the dark sky.

Sinbad looked back—happy that he had tired out Roc.

He took a moment to catch his breath and just when he took a step forward—

The bird whooshed down, pulling angrily at the branches of the trees, and crashed to the ground, pinning down Sinbad's body and caging him with its claws. It squawked loudly right into his face, ready to peck.

Sinbad, immobile with fear, breathlessly looked at the giant bird looming above him. There was just one way out. He decided to take the chance and like a spear swung the branch into the bird's open throat.

For a moment, the bird was confused. It moved back—its eyes squinted with agony and it began to yelp and stumble all over the place, almost losing its footing, probably unable to understand how a simple wooden stick was able to do so much damage.

Still on the forest floor, Sinbad felt slight pity but also relief as the bird continued to struggle and thrash around violently in the rain before finally coughing out the stick. As it did, slimy brownish goo spewed out of its throat.

The bird looked at Sinbad square in the eye.

Eyes ferocious and dark.

Okay, I'm going to die.

And as it inched closer and opened its mouth, Sinbad shut his eyes, dreading its hard beak...

His brain flashbacked to a string of events and how strangely his life had turned out. He couldn't remember anything from his childhood—parents or friends, and now, at this time even the teachings of the guild belonged to a distant past. He tried to think about Master Reis in his last moments, but his thoughts only veered to the girl in the floral dress,

hanging upside down from a tree. Sinbad had a small, sad smile on his face as he waited for the inevitable.

But it was just the rain that kept beating down on him.

Why is the bird taking so much time?

Sinbad slowly opened his eyes to see a figure standing in front of him.

It was Safeena. Her hair was all wet and she had extended her arm, an energy radiating from her fingers with which she was controlling the bird.

‘Too much anger...’ she snarled, ‘Need to do...’

The bird was trying to break through the protective shield she had created between them. Roc didn’t care any more that it was Safeena. It was gnawing at the barrier with its sharp beak and talons.

‘Need to...’ Safeena muttered as she instantly used all her force and pushed the shield towards the bird, smacking it into its face.

The bird was flung back into the air and it hit its head against a tree, its wings flapping no more and its eyes shut. It banged against the ground.

Safeena knelt down, bereft of energy.

Sinbad rushed and hugged her from behind. ‘Are you okay?’

He could see she was tearing up.

‘I killed him,’ she said, weeping. ‘I killed him.’

‘It’s okay.’

They embraced for a while. Sinbad cupped his hands around her head and clung tightly to her.

‘Wherever I am, Roc follow,’ she said. ‘I don’t know... if right thing, what I just did.’

‘It was.’

‘Am I evil?’ she asked, teary eyed.

Sinbad breathed deeply. ‘Like the Minotaur? Yes! You just need a buffalo head,’ he said, hoping to diffuse the tension.

She smiled.

‘Safeena... why did you run away from the compound?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Bad man. He wanted to kill you, take me to goat demon. Really bad. We must run again,’ she said, trying to get up.

Sinbad sighed. ‘I, umm... we fought. He’s dead.’

Safeena eyes widened with surprise. ‘Dead? Whoaaa. Good.’ ‘Actually that’s why I am here. Being punished for it.’ ‘How—’

They heard footsteps. Sinbad held on to her protectively as if he was tougher than her, even though she was ten times more powerful than him. In reality, they were just two scared children in the middle of a forest under a dark and rainy sky. A figure walked towards them.

‘Good work.’

‘You... you were here all along?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Of course, I am your master. I have to make sure you are safe. I just gave you the illusion that you were alone, and you thrived on it. You did it,’ Master Reis said, giving a nod of appreciation.

‘What... But...’ Sinbad studied his master’s face in anger. He wanted to curse him and hurl a million questions at him, but he suddenly felt conflicting emotions rise within him and he actually felt... good. He realized he’d done something that he never thought he could do—conquer fear.

‘And I also knew,’ Master Reis added, ‘that if the girl sees you in danger, she would help you. The only person who could kill the bird was its

creator.’

‘You used me as bait.’ Sinbad shot him a look.

‘Yes. Do you feel bad about it?’ Master Reis asked with a straight face, but he didn’t actually care for the answer.

Sinbad wanted to say yes, but he remained quiet. He was conflicted about what he felt for Master Reis. Sometimes he did seem like a good man, but he was also a deceitful liar. But most of all, he never thought twice before using someone for his gain. Not even Sinbad.

Safeena looked distrustfully at Reis and spoke up, ‘Let’s leave from here, please.’

Master Reis nodded. ‘Yes. But we have one last thing to do.’ And he smiled.

THIRTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY

Sinbad was trying to touch his nose with his tongue.

His tongue wasn't long enough, but every time he tried, he hoped it would touch. It was a display of an endless level of dedication from a short-tongued boy.

He was getting bored in the cell.

A guard wearing white armour and the black cape with a red cross appeared. Next to him was a table on which were kept Sinbad's rucksack and sword. The guard had a spear and his eyes were fixed on Sinbad.

I'm losing time.

Sinbad tried to devise a plan.

He stood up and hobbled towards the prison bars that confined him, hollering to the guard: 'Need help. Feel sick. Throat... my throat...'

He pretended to choke, gagging and clutching at his mouth as he fell to the ground and wailed in agony.

From the corner of his eye, Sinbad saw that the guard was befuddled and didn't know what to do. He was staring at him suspiciously.

Sinbad gasped for breath. 'Need water.'

The guard was visibly scared and since he knew the importance of this prisoner, he opened the cell doors. With fumbling fingers, he offered him ajar of water.

‘Here. Here. Open your mouth,’ he said as he got closer, almost kneeling down to pour water into Sinbad’s mouth. At that very instant, the boy opened his eyes and punched the guard in the face, grabbing the keys that dangled from his baldric and rolled out of the cell. He shut the door behind him, locking it before the guard could even react.

Holding his bleeding nose, the guard put his spear between the bars and tried to poke at him, but Sinbad quickly stepped back.

‘Na, na,’ Sinbad grinned as he grabbed his sword and his rucksack. ‘Good day to you, sir. See you never.’

He was being chased.

Sinbad could see swarms of knights following him with spears and swords. He hadn’t expected the other guards to spot him when he was dashing through the dimly lit corridors.

He didn’t know where to go. He frantically searched for an exit but ended up entering a room and shutting the door tightly behind him.

The guards pounded on the door and he scanned the room. Right in the middle of it was a guard but without his armour. He was in a large tub, taking a hot bath.

He looked at Sinbad, blinking at him, confused.

‘Hi. I’ll just use your window if you don’t mind.’ Sinbad smiled meekly as he tiptoed to the window and looked outside. It overlooked a stable where there was a lot of hay that the horses were chewing.

Sinbad was on the third storey. Sinbad shrugged; he might die if he didn’t land right.

He turned to look back and he saw the soldier standing—with a towel wrapped around his waist and a sword in his hand. ‘Fight me, prisoner.’

Sinbad drew his sword and said, ‘I never thought I would see this day.’

The towelled soldier came forward and jabbed the sword into the air, but Sinbad parried it. Then he swivelled like a dancer and went near a bucket of dirty water.

The guard made another attack and Sinbad dodged it again, before kicking the bucket. The water spilled and as the guard stepped ahead, he lost balance and fell flat on his back, his sword dropped to the side.

‘Are we done now?’

Sinbad carefully walked to the window again...

But just then, several guards broke the door and entered inside.

There were almost a dozen of them looking incredulously at the semi-naked soldier, who was groaning, and the boy who had caused the commotion.

Sinbad looked outside the window. Then he gave one look back at the guards and said, ‘Well, it was great getting chased by you.’

And taking a deep breath, he jumped from it, hoping to land on the bale of hay.

He could feel the harsh wind hitting him until he fell on something cushiony. He turned his head and saw a number of amazed horses in front

of him, who stopped eating their hay and whined.

‘Calm down, boys,’ Sinbad said as he got up and urged one of the stallions forward. It neighed.

Sinbad looked up and saw that the guards had come to the window and were watching him.

Sinbad didn’t wait any further.

He quickly grabbed the reins and led the horse. Towards the baron’s castle. Towards Cain.

Sinbad was riding in the lonely desert. And he was thirsty. But now wasn’t the time to think of water or food ... not that he had any. It was time to save his friends, then get the hell out of the castle and save the world.

If only getting Ashrafiyah out was easy.

But life is full of trials and tribulations. Sinbad rode full speed ahead, ignoring the thirst rising up in his throat.

Who was Cain talking about? Sinbad asked himself. There is someone following our trail, someone who doesn’t want us to succeed.

But who? Someone from my past?

As he reached near the castle that stood like a majestic marvel of architecture in the middle of Rub’ al Khali desert, Sinbad saw a fire.

And explosions.

They were massive. He was horrified.

Apparently, Cain had started the mayhem.

He rode his horse at a full gallop, hoping to save his friends.

THIRTY-FIVE

FOUR YEARS AGO

Master Reis tossed the severed head of the bird on the ground.

All the villagers and troopers saw the bloody head roll around with its tongue hanging out and eyes closed.

Sinbad was standing next to Reis. The villagers were gasping in shock, awe and absolute relief. They were joyously clapping hands and hugging each other. The impassive Commander Qasim stood far from the scene but close enough to hear what Reis was going to say:

‘Hear ye, my apprentice has slayed the beast of the woods and the mountains. Now you can all build your lives, leave this compound and cherish your freedom.’

All the villagers rejoiced and clapped for Sinbad. He felt good, even though it wasn’t him who had slayed the bird. It was Safeena. He was still worried about her, but Reis had instructed her to stay hidden near the shore in the company of the seagulls while they announced Roc’s death here.

‘What about the girl?’ Qasim asked.

‘Also slayed.’

Qasim froze and there was a dead silence, followed by him nodding and walking off towards the fortress. Sinbad had no idea what Reis had in mind, but he needed to do something about the secret Safeena had told them.

After finishing their interaction with the villagers, Sinbad and Master Reis walked to the commander's quarters. When they entered, he seemed to be busy with paperwork.

'I guess I should thank you,' Qasim said reluctantly.

'You don't look happy,' Master Reis said.

'Lots of rebuilding to be done.'

'The ship is waiting for us,' Reis said. 'We'll be leaving with your permission since you had punished the boy.'

Qasim gave Sinbad an icy glance. 'He did kill my soldier and this achievement of his doesn't change the fact that he will be held up on trial in Baghdad. You might show him off as a hero even though I know you must have killed the bird yourself, but now my hands are tied and I can't have a hero executed.' He frowned. 'Good play, hunter. Though I'll raise hell and make sure the court listens to me.'

'I'm sure.' Reis smirked. 'The guild has their own set of lawyers, but hey, who needs a trial to discuss the law when you were the one who broke it?'

Qasim leant forward. He wanted to say something, but before that he dismissed the guards in his office. 'Accusing a commander has some serious implications.'

'Given that you are a commander,' Reis replied.

'What do you mean?' His pupils dilated.

'It was you all along, wasn't it?' The master hunter smiled. 'You supplied the food from the granary to the witch. One by one, you killed Safeena's family—her parents and her brothers and then told everyone that she was cursed, so she won't be allowed back in her own village. Poor thing. And then, you and that demon Leonard told Safeena that it was the villagers who had killed her family. You played one against another.

I was confused for a while until I spoke to her only last night and she told me ... that it was the commander who escorted her to the demon's house.'

Qasim's face drained of colour.

'You hypnotized Abdul to do your dirty work and when he failed, you blamed Sinbad for killing an officer,' Reis said. 'Sinbad told me how Abdul kept muttering the same thing that the demon was muttering, that how my boy was such a distraction to the girl.'

Qasim kept quiet and stood up.

Reis pulled out his sword, but Qasim didn't attack. He turned and walked towards the bookshelf. All of a sudden, Qasim let out a laugh.

It started small until it grew darker and worse.

'You were wrong about one thing.' The voice was strangely hoarse now and very much unlike Qasim's. 'I didn't hypnotize Abdul. He was my servant. And he was the one who killed that girl's family. Not me.' He turned to face them and Sinbad staggered back—Qasim's face had changed.

And was still changing. It was younger. He had longer hair that was slicked to the side. His lips were more curved and his ears were short. He grew taller, breaking through his tight uniform. He pulled off his armour and loosened his tunic. His eyes glowed with pure, white light. 'Have you guessed who I am?'

'An angel,' Reis said, face perfectly placid.

'Incorrect. A fallen angel.' He laughed. 'She's alive, isn't she? I can feel her. Just like how I can feel everyone's emotions around me.'

Reis clutched the sword. 'Why is one of the fallen so interested in a mere girl?'

'Made a deal with the Devil.' He shrugged. 'And you are not letting me fulfil my end of the bargain. But I like how you played me. I like how

you investigated and caught me too. Nice and neat. Now tell me, where is the girl?'

'You'll not find her. She's going with us,' Reis replied, clenching his jaw.

'Oh no. I will. I'm an angel, a Mal'ak, you see.'

'But the fallen don't have a lot of powers other than shapeshifting and a little strength,' Reis scoffed.

The man stopped smiling. His shadow seemed to fill the room. 'A little strength? I am Azrael, the Angel of Death, and you think I have a little strength?' He came forward and with a slight shove, pushed Reis who hit the wall.

Azrael then turned to Sinbad and said, 'Join me, kid. You show promise. Don't be smitten by the guild.'

Sinbad didn't respond. He was experiencing tremors of fear.

'Tell you what,' he said smilingly. 'You tell me where the girl is and in return, I shall tell you who you were before these crazy fiends turned you into a hunter. Who your parents were. I'm sure you would be interested.'

Sinbad swallowed a lump in his throat. He looked at Reis who was slumped to the floor—his master who was good at lying and deceit, who left him in a dark forest alone with the wolves and the one who had never told him about his childhood before the guild picked him up. Sinbad considered Azrael's words. He had thought about this—about his past, about who he was ... and he could never collect enough memories.

Azrael seemed to have read Sinbad's thoughts.

'I can help you with the information you need ... if only you tell me what I need to know. You have a special heritage, kid, believe me. Tell me where the girl is and I shall give you what you desire or...' He came forward, his white eyes blowing out smoke, 'I shall kill you.'

‘Don’t!’ Reis called out from the other end, trying to get up. ‘Don’t! He can’t kill you, boy. He’s bound to not kill humans. He can just influence them, that’s why it was Abdul who hurt you, not him. He cannot have the blood of mortals on his hands. Not on Earth.’

‘But I do speak the truth,’ Azrael said, shrugging and walking away from Sinbad. ‘I can tell him about his past.’

‘I... I...’ Sinbad didn’t get the chance to tell Azrael what he wanted since Reis sprang forward with his sword and instantly slammed it against Azrael’s chest...

And the fallen angel disappeared.

‘Did he die?’ Sinbad asked the befuddled Reis.

The master sighed, leaning on his sword, which he thrust into the ground. ‘Unfortunately, no.’ He shook his head. ‘Angels can only die if you strike their heart. I wasn’t able to do that. He has just disappeared and teleported for now, but he might strike later. We should leave. I think our time here is done.’

THIRTY-SIX

PRESENT DAY

He entered the path leading to the castle.

There was chaos everywhere.

The horse Sinbad was on neighed and led him to fall to the ground. And then in utter fear, the horse galloped away.

Amidst the fire, the echoing howls, Sinbad saw that the lane towards the castle was riddled with vampire corpses—some burnt, while others had been stabbed by hawthorn swords.

It was a conscienceless massacre.

Sinbad couldn’t believe that the monsters here were not the Strigoi. It was the humans. Lawless mortals who didn’t believe in tolerance but in violent extremism.

He drew his sword and rushed towards the gallery where he had last seen Ashrafiyah and Idris. He stopped in his tracks when he saw a Strigoi couple running away from vampire hunters who were chasing them. When they finally caught up to them, the hunters attacked them with stakes, gutting their abdomens and leaving them dry.

Sinbad wanted to help.

But he had no time.

He ran to the open gallery, trying to contain his guilt and drown out the screams. The only thought running through his mind was what Mehmood had once said: a hero is someone who does the right thing even in the worst times.

Unfortunately, I'm not one. I never was.

Sinbad saw death and destruction and even though it bothered him, he ignored it. He wanted to help the maximum number of people, but he knew helping wouldn't yield anything right now; if anything, it might put him at a greater risk. He had to be callous, like his master used to be and who had taught him to not let his emotions dictate his work-life decisions.

I have to find Ashrafiyah and Idris.

He reached the gallery and witnessed hundreds of Strigoi lying there lifeless amid rubble and debris. The other towers were burning and exploding.

This is madness.

'Well, looky who we have here!' someone behind him called out.

Sinbad slowly turned and saw two knights of the Adam's Children with their blunt hawthorn axes.

One of the knights said, 'I thought we locked this lad up. Whatcha doin' here, boy?'

'An escapee, ain't he? Well, as Brother Cain ordered, kill on sight.'

They hastily dashed towards him.

'You guys don't rest, do you?' Sinbad got ready with his sword, bracing himself to face the madness.

But out of nowhere, a figure appeared and slashed their throats in quick succession. Sinbad couldn't see who this powerful figure was, until it came in front of him, with the bodies falling behind to the ground in a heap.

Idris emerged with her double-sided spear.

‘I came here to rescue you,’ Sinbad said to her incredulously.

‘As if I needed to be rescued.’ Idris smiled. ‘Why is all this happening?’

‘Well, your reliable friend Cain isn’t so reliable after all. He backstabbed us. He knew we were coming to him. He was hired by someone to catch me.’

‘You? What? Who?’ Idris was no longer smiling. A huge explosion shook the foundations of the castle.

Sinbad and Idris lurched across the floor. Around the bailey of the castle, they saw a group of vampires running away from the Adam’s Children who were aiming their crossbows at them.

‘He’s using Greek fire to burn the place.’ Sinbad gritted his teeth as he looked around. ‘Popping big balls of fire and using some ingredient to cause the explosions.’

‘Damn!’ she cursed.

‘What?’

‘I made a deal with him, a long time ago. It was about this.’ Idris closed her eyes and gulped. ‘You know the guild is into technological advancements in warfare, and we had perfected explosives. Cain wanted the plans and I made a copy and gave them to him. I didn’t know he would stoop so low and use them to burn civilizations like this.’

Sinbad remembered the trade-off Cain had talked about. In return, her husband would not be hunted by the Adam’s Children.

‘Where is Ashrafiyah?’ he asked. Time is running out.

‘I was going to her. The last time I saw her, she was in the dinner hall with the baron.’

‘Let’s go!’

Idris had a vengeful look in her eyes. ‘You go.’ She looked at the vampires who were being put against the wall and tortured minutes before they were killed. Rivers of blood spilled on the green grass of the courtyard. ‘I need to save them. They are my responsibility.’

‘Listen... I understand. But we’re running out of time. The world will end, you know. It will not wait for us just because we saved these vampires from dying. Time is not on our side and we have to choose,’ Sinbad said. ‘We are here to get Ashrafiyah and just leave. We hunt these vampires. We are the guild whether we like it or not. It’s what we do. Who we are. And we don’t have time to save them.’

Idris clenched her jaw. ‘I have to.’

‘We are hunters. We hunt. We don’t save.’

‘No, Sinbad. That’s Master Reis in you talking,’ she said. ‘Stepping in and saving lives when you don’t even have to—that is what makes us who we are.’ And then she sprinted off to the bailey.

Sinbad felt momentarily guilty and angry at himself for behaving like Master Reis, but he had become the person he was because of his master. He shrugged. He had learnt to choose his battles. Sinbad was loyal to his friends, but to the world... he wasn’t so sure. He had seen enough. In fact, the only reason he was saving this world was so he could meet Safeena after such a long time. He had chosen her. And he wanted to know why she was doing what she was doing. But for the rest, he had given up on this world a long time ago. A world filled with evil, dastardly people.

Without a second thought, he left for the dinner hall.

Lifeless Strigoi, still in their finery, were lined up close to the tables.

The fire was quickly spreading through the ceiling and the walls. Sinbad had his sword out as he carefully walked inside, shouting: ‘Ashrafiyahl’

‘Here!’

Sinbad rushed forward and saw a vampire hunter. He saw the knight’s back, his white cape drenched with the blood of the vampires. The knight turned around, revealing his face. It was Brother Cain and in his grasp was the baron.

Cain looked at Sinbad, a frenzied smile on his face as he raised the hawthorn blade and plunged it into the baron’s neck. The blood sprayed over Cain’s face and he tossed the baron’s body in the corner, his golden eyes glimmering.

A terrified shriek arose.

Sinbad noticed it came from somewhere under the tables. He knelt down to see Ashrafiyah, who was hiding and whimpering with fear.

‘Get out,’ he said.

‘No. Kill that maniac first. And get his pouch, it has my gold.’ Sinbad stood up and looked at the knight who was wiping his bloody face with his gauntlets.

‘You escaped,’ Cain said. ‘That’s a shame. But then, I only made a promise to trap you. Nothing about you getting out and interfering with my plans. Now I have to kill you.’

‘I know why you wanted the warfare plans,’ Sinbad said sternly.

Cain came forward with his blade and swung it towards Sinbad who blocked it and rolled over, fighting back with his metal. Cain turned around swiftly. ‘And why is that?’

‘I didn’t want to say it earlier, but I thought hard about this. First, you have golden eyes. For a mortal, that’s very uncommon. Second, you have ...’ Sinbad rolled over again and went for Cain’s pauldrons, breaking them into several pieces.

Next, Sinbad tore through his cape, slashing the big red cross and leaving behind a gaping hole in its place.

Cain scowled. He instantly lunged, but Sinbad deflected and kicked him in the stomach. He fell backwards.

‘You have no shadow. I noticed it back in your little torture chamber. Plus the intel you sought was about changing Dhampirs into humans.’

‘So?’

‘I figured out who you are.’

Cain came forward and brought his sword down with mighty force, and metallic clangs sounded as blade met blade, until their faces were only inches apart.

‘Who?’ he sneered.

‘A half-vampire. A Dhampir. You are trying to get rid of this disease. Do your men know the biggest irony of this entire siege?’

Cain flared his nostrils, pulling himself back. ‘Smart. Are you going to tell on me?’

‘I might not if you leave me with Ashrafiyah and go your own way. I don’t meddle in Roman politics.’

‘I wish I could believe you, hunter. Anyhow, I have to kill Ashrafiyah due to my association with her. It disgusted me that I was taking her help, but I knew it was just for a little while.’ Cain chuckled.

‘I need her.’

‘Does it look like I care?’ He scowled.

‘Why choose to be a hunter when you are a vampire yourself?’ Sinbad hurled his sword forward, but Cain dodged it and smacked his sword against Sinbad’s back.

Sinbad felt a surging pain and before he could attack, Cain swung his blade against Sinbad’s arm, slashing his right palm. The blow knocked the sky-iron sword from his grip as he knelt on the ground, eyes filled with tears and blood dripping from his right hand.

Cain stood opposite him, keeping the tip of the sword at Sinbad’s throat, and said, ‘You might say I chose to be a hunter because I was a vampire. I was mortified when I learnt of my true nature. When I was born, my mother took the blood of a sheep that had been devoured by a wolf and she made me drink it. I was just an infant. I was the seventh son, but I was abandoned because there were too many mouths to feed. And here I am, forging my own destiny. Look at me.’ He took a deep breath and added, ‘So, any last words since you are going to die and don’t have a sword to defend yourself?’ He smiled, poising the sword precariously against the vein in Sinbad’s neck.

‘Who was the person who instructed you to hold me back?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Person? It wasn’t a person.’ Cain smirked. ‘It was the Blackwinged One.’

A chill ran down Sinbad’s spine.

He knew who it was.

Sinbad then spoke up, ‘You forgot one thing though.’

‘What?’

‘My sword can teleport.’

Cain’s expression changed as Sinbad’s sword sprung to his hand and in a flash, he slashed it down Brother Cain’s arm, cutting it off. He shrieked in pain and terror, looking at his severed arm and stepped back—only to fall through the window behind him.

Ashrafiyah scurried out from under the table and said, ‘Way to go, lover. Though you didn’t get my coins.’ She looked over at the dead baron. ‘I feel bad for not liking him enough to care.’

Sinbad didn’t say anything as he walked to the window to look down.

And when he did, he saw no one.

Cain had escaped.

They left the castle, riding the remaining horses of the knights.

The orange sun burnt overhead. When they reached a little distance, Idris panted, ‘We did it.’

‘Did you save them?’

‘Aye.’ She grinned.

Sinbad smiled back. He felt good. But right now, his mind was only occupied with the information Cain had given him.

‘Cain didn’t die,’ Sinbad said. ‘He’s a half-vampire. He survived the fall.’

‘He’s a problem for another day,’ Idris said.

Ashrafiyah was snoring sitting behind Sinbad, her head resting on his shoulders.

He held the reins of the horse with one hand, while wrapping around the other hand a piece of cloth that he tore out of Ashrafiyah's ridiculously long dress. 'I need to tell you something.'

'What?' Idris asked.

'I know who's stopping us from succeeding.'

Idris arched her brows. 'Anyone we know?'

'I know him.' He sighed. 'And I'm unfortunate enough to know too much about him.'

'Who is it?'

The sunlight fell on him as he said, 'It's the Black-winged One, also known as Azrael, the Angel of Death.'

THIRTY-SEVEN

FOUR YEARS AGO

Sinbad was on the ship, sailing back to the harbour.

He felt content, as if a tremendous weight had been lifted off of him. He had been so worried about surviving on the island that now he just wanted to rest on the bed in his cabin. The ship navigated the waters of the Persian Gulf.

There was a knock on the door. Sinbad didn't feel like opening it because he was sleepy, but he did get up and open it reluctantly, fearing it might be Master Reis.

Instead, it was Safeena.

'Hey!' He beamed. 'What happened?'

'Can't sleep.' She frowned. 'Come in?'

Sinbad nodded, motioning for her to come inside while closing the door behind her. Suddenly feeling conscious about the untidy state of his cabin, he nervously started arranging the scattered books and cleaning his bed.

'It's okay.' Safeena giggled, sitting on a chair beside the bed and she began looking through the books.

Sinbad paused and looked at her. Her curious yellow cat eyes skimmed through the pages as her black pupils slit vertically. She was

dressed in dirty rags, but she looked really beautiful.

‘Sit.’ She patted the chair next to her.

Sinbad did so hesitatingly.

‘Where we goin’?’ she asked.

‘Well, to a place where you’ll be safe,’ Sinbad replied, thinking about how he and Reis had hidden her in a sack and took her on board.

‘Sure?’

‘I can bet my life on it.’ Sinbad smiled, even though he wasn’t sure where they would find a suitable home for Safeena. Perhaps give her to a childless couple that Reis might know of or get her a job at the weaver’s shop.

Master Reis would know what’s best for Safeena.

‘Sometimes, I feel I’m too strong,’ she said. ‘Don’t like this power.’

‘Why?’

‘Great power is great suffering.’ She closed her eyes and tears trickled down her pale cheeks. ‘My parents... my pet...’

Sinbad put his arm around her. ‘It’ll be fine. You have been braver than you could ever imagine. I am so glad I know you.’

She nodded innocently, wiping her tears, and put her head down in his lap, saying, ‘Tell me a story.’

‘Well, you like Greek myths ... umm, stories, right?’

She nodded.

‘A long time ago, there was a war between the Olympians and the Titans. There was a girl called Calypso, daughter of Atlas, a Titan, who

sided with her father. When the Olympians won, they cast her off to an island and cursed her to never leave that island. Thus, she would suffer for being loyal to her blood. And she continued to suffer until one day, a handsome, charming prince named Odysseus came to that island.'

'Minotaur killer?'

Sinbad chuckled. 'No. Different.' He patted her head and ran his fingers through her black hair.

'Odysseus wanted to leave, but Calypso persuaded him to stay there. She tried to do everything for him and Odysseus was glad. He liked Calypso too. They stayed together on that island for seven years until Odysseus realized he had important responsibilities. He told her he had to leave.'

'Sad,' she sighed.

'So he left Calypso. He was heartbroken as well, for he was leaving the love of his life to fulfil his responsibilities.'

'Why all great love stories end bad?' she asked.

'If they don't, they wouldn't be called great love stories.'

She didn't say anything. Sinbad kept caressing her hair.

'Am I evil?' she asked.

'No.'

'But can I be evil?'

Sinbad paused for a moment and answered, 'Of course you can't.

It's not in your nature.'

'Goat demon says it is. Destined to end the world.'

‘But you don’t have to,’ he said. ‘We are defined by our choices. Just because you’re born a certain way doesn’t mean you don’t have a choice in what you are going to do in the future.’

‘Can’t run from destiny, Sinbad,’ she said. They sat in silence until she spoke up, ‘I need a favour.’

‘Yes.’

‘Kill me,’ she said, and his hands froze, ‘if I turn evil. Please?’

Sinbad wanted to say that he can’t promise that. ‘You won’t.’

‘If I do, then kill me.’

‘You’ll be too powerful to be killed. You will probably fly away,’ Sinbad said jokingly.

‘No. When you’ll come to me and say that you have to kill me, I’ll know then that my time has come,’ she said. ‘I would surrender. But only for you. No one else.’

Sinbad sighed and said, ‘I’m going to call you Calypso, since you were on an island and all.’

‘Calypso. I like the name.’ She giggled.

And after a while, she dozed off. After moving her to the bed and adjusting a pillow under her head, he walked out on to the deck to face the darkness.

There were some crew members standing there. Belonging to the caliphate, it was the same ship that Sinbad and Reis had travelled on earlier.

The moon looked exceptional today and the floorboards were bathed in its light. A few yards away, Sinbad saw Master Reis leaning on the taffrail. He was dressed in a casual tunic and was unarmed.

Sinbad walked to him. ‘Master, you didn’t sleep?’

Reis turned. ‘Seems like you didn’t either.’

Sinbad looked down and after a short pause, he said, ‘Thank you ... for everything.’

‘Don’t thank me. It’s my duty to protect you,’ he said in a distant voice.

‘Where is Cal... Safeena going to stay? Have you thought about it?’

‘She’ll be coming with us to the guild. The grand master would love to see her.’ He had a malicious smile spread across his face. ‘You have no idea how huge this is going to be for the guild; they can study her thoroughly. We have the Lord of the Dawn’s weapon.’

He didn’t like the sound of that.

And Sinbad began to wonder whether getting Safeena off the island was a smart decision or not.

THIRTY-EIGHT

PRESENT DAY

By Fate and Fortune sailed towards the east.

Sinbad was treating his wounds with several bandages and ointments. He was having a hard time with his roughened, bruised hand that had a huge slash. It was his sword hand and now holding something as simple as a vial was hurting him.

This is going to be a problem.

There was a knock on his cabin's door.

'Come in,' he said.

He saw Idris slowly peeking in before entering. Without saying a word, she sat down in the chair opposite Sinbad's and tended his hand. She wrapped the bandages around it properly, holding a pin in her mouth, and put some ointment on the bruise. Then she used the pin to hold the bandages together.

'Thanks,' Sinbad groaned as he leant back in his chair. 'How can I be of service?'

'Ashrafiyah is a nuisance! Apparently, she doesn't care about the world ending as long as she gets a thousand dirhams. I had to promise her and write an official letter that she will get them once her job is done,' Idris blurted in one breath.

‘She can be selfish.’ Sinbad chuckled. ‘But she’s good at what she does.’

‘I hope she doesn’t kill one of our crew members.’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if she does. They have to have a human every few months, but I’m sure she can remain starved for the next couple of days.’

‘Great.’ Idris shook her head and rolled her purple eyes. ‘But still, talk to her about staying decent and helpful and most of all.. . loyal.’

‘She is not loyal to anyone, Idris. If someone else pays her to kill us, she will,’ Sinbad said matter-of-factly. ‘So we have to be very careful with what kind of company she’s keeping.’

‘Wonderful,’ she said and got up. ‘If you are ready, come out. Your friend Husayn is being harassed by Markus into being a tougher man.’ She guffawed.

Sinbad drew in breath while she walked to the door and said, ‘Cain told me what he did for you. I also know why you are on this mission. To save your husband.’

She tightened her fist. Without turning, she said, ‘So why do you speak of it now?’

‘Because...’ Sinbad blinked. ‘I was wrong to assume you were here only to save your husband. But when you tried to help those vampires, I realized there is more to you than meets the eye.’

Idris turned around and Sinbad expected a flash of fury in her eyes, but instead, she said, ‘Thank you. I just... I want to reach soon and get the trumpet. I know I don’t show it, but I’m just so worried.’

‘Don’t be. We will.’

‘We hardly have any time left.’

Sinbad pursed his lips. Soon, he would be meeting Safeena and it'll all be different. Only a matter of time before he sees her again. .. and kills her.

'See, I know you didn't say anything when I told you about Safeena's fate,' Idris said. 'And the entire guild knows how much you like her. But you shouldn't be in the middle of all this if you can't do the dirty deed yourself.'

'I can't promise you that.'

Idris stepped forward, her face half in shadow, half in light. 'But I can promise you that I wouldn't care whether you were part of my crew or not. I will end you as well.'

Sinbad flared his nostrils. He wanted to shoot back an angry retort, but she left. She didn't understand how complicated it was. Shouldn't it be easier for her to understand? After all, she went against the guild to save her vampire husband.

Sinbad sighed. It became tougher to save Safeena now. He had thought of convincing her to change her mind and come to him, but now...

He had to face Idris.

The crystal blue water made him feel at peace.

He had initially been feeling seasick, but now the boundless blue sky and the ocean were enough to make him smile.

Sinbad scanned the bustling deck of the ship. Idris was nowhere to be seen. Ashrafiyah stood on the forecastle with her spyglass. In one corner, Husayn was practising sword fighting with Markus, who towered over him.

Whenever Husayn would try to jab and attack him, Markus would deflect smoothly and push him to the ground, say an insult and tell him to stand up again.

Sinbad snickered.

He couldn’t see Pressa around; she probably was with the boatswain in the kitchen, making food for the crew.

Sinbad walked to Husayn and Markus, his arms crossed over his chest.

‘Giving you a hard time?’ Sinbad asked Husayn, who fell down again, but stood up, dusting off his butt.

‘Ah, well,’ Husayn mumbled.

‘Weak!’ shouted Markus. ‘Weak!’ He pointed at Husayn. ‘Come, fight, little one.’

Husayn grunted and he tried to use his lazy footwork while hastily swinging his sword, only to be put down by Markus.

‘Weak! Too fast. Sword fighting is about patience. Class dismissed.’ He shook his head as he walked towards the lower deck.

Husayn was on the ground and he threw down his sword in anger. ‘He reminds me of my father, you know. He’d also keep telling me how weak I am. He used to teach me swordplay and horse riding and I failed miserably at both.’

Sinbad knelt down to Husayn’s level as the ship rocked on the seas. ‘I’m sure you’ll get better.’

‘Well, what if I don’t? To be honest, I really don’t see the point in me being here. I’m here just because I’m your friend. That’s it,’ he lamented. ‘I wish I had more to do.’

‘You will,’ Sinbad said. ‘But remember, your strength isn’t swordplay and horse riding. It’s wordplay. Because of you, we have Markus and his

band of soldiers. Always remember, not every weapon has to be a weapon. Embrace what you are good at, and don't hanker for things you are not so good at. Hone the skills you already excel at.'

'Look at you. All wise like some priest,' he said and Sinbad smiled.

'Lover!' Ashrafiyah yelled from the forecastle.

Husayn raised his brows. 'Lover? Interesting.'

'Long story.'

'I bet.'

'Shut up.'

Husayn laughed as Ashrafiyah walked to Sinbad, all flustered. She peered through the spyglass. She was wearing tight-fitted jet-black clothes that accentuated her toned body, paired with big, black boots.

'How's your hand?' she asked.

'Good.'

'Good enough to hold this?' she asked, pointing to the spyglass.

Sinbad nodded. But before peering through it, he said, 'I hope I can trust you enough to not screw this up.' He recalled Idris's words about Ashrafiyah.

'Darling, no one has enough currency to buy my trust,' she said with a wink.

Sinbad cursed under his breath as he saw through the spyglass and spotted an island a few miles away from them. 'An island? Interesting,' he said blandly. 'I'm surprised to find islands in the sea,' he added sarcastically.

‘Oh no, you dumb little boy. The smell takes me there,’ she said. ‘We need to make a stop since I am getting a feeling that Safeena stopped there too.’

Sinbad nodded. ‘Sure.’

‘You didn’t see it, did you?’

‘What?’

‘Lover, sometimes you disappoint me. Look at the west coast of the island,’ the Strigoi replied.

Sinbad did. And his heart sunk.

There was a shipwreck on the shore of the island.

‘A wreck. Who does it belong to? Could it be Safeena’s ship?’

‘Perhaps.’ Ashrafiyah took the spyglass away. ‘The better question is that since these are slow-moving waters, what caused the wreck?’

THIRTY-NINE

FOUR YEARS AGO

They had reached Baghdad.

Travelling for so long took a toll on Safeena and Sinbad, even though Master Reis looked fresh and energetic.

Sinbad hadn't slept properly—first on the ship, then in the caravan that took them to the bustling hub of the capital, where they saw bazaars, big dome-structured buildings, mosques and the locals. Guards of the Abbasid caliphate marched on the roads. On their way, there were stables, grocers, camels and red-bricked bridges. Some streets were narrow and some were wide enough that two carriages could pass each other.

In the distance, Sinbad saw the palace of the caliph. Sinbad had never met the illustrious boy. Yes, the caliph was a boy, a young man who had inherited the title from his brother who died at an early age.

They reached the fort of the Ninurta Guild. It stood like any other fort out there, except for its tall, marvellous towers, which Sinbad knew acted as lookouts for patrols of militia men.

'What is this?' Safeena asked as they huddled together inside the fort.

'Don't worry. It's the safest place you can be from the people who want to hurt you,' Sinbad explained.

And he wasn't lying. No supernatural entity could enter the fort, for it was well protected by spells and charms that had been put in place a

hundred years ago by a sorcerer.

Safeena held Sinbad's hand and he blushed, saying nothing as they walked past hunters wearing rune-painted tunics, long coats and weapons. There was a large courtyard around which winding paths went off in various directions.

The statue of a well-bearded Al-Nuhrad with a weapon and a book in his hands stood in the centre of the courtyard.

There were apprentices receiving training in swordplay with wooden sticks, while some were practising spells on makeshift wooden dolls. A botany class was underway in which potions were being tested to examine their different effects. There was an archery competition going on as well.

Sinbad followed Master Reis. When they reached the grand master's lodge, Reis turned to Sinbad and said, 'I need to take Safeena with me now.'

Safeena frantically looked at Sinbad. 'He go with me.'

'No. He has to go to his room now. Someone very important wants to meet you, Safeena. Very important.'

The grand master of hunters was the head of the group and the most respected Elder Seid, the oldest one at that.

Since the time Sinbad had joined the guild, he aspired to reach that level and attain that kind of respect after which he would become a master like Reis.

He turned to Safeena, her yellow eyes filled with fear. 'It's okay. It's just for a while. You'll be fine.'

Safeena nodded meekly, letting go of his hand and following Reis.

Sinbad began to feel queasy in his stomach, seeing Safeena leave him and enter the grand master's lodge.

He felt—and he didn't like why in the most protected place in the world—weak in the knees.

Sinbad was back in his cabin.

And there was a fresh, crisp envelope lying on his table.

He picked it up.

To: Lover

From: Your favourite soul-eater,

Ashrafiyah

Sinbad grinned. He had met the Strigoi when he was in Oman. She had helped Reis and him track down a Strigoi Mort who was murdering people and eating their flesh even though that's not what vampires do. Later they had learnt that he was a new breed, a new kind of vampire. Ashrafiyah, who did it solely for the money, took a liking to Sinbad. The huge age gap between them did not bother her since she had stopped ageing.

They often wrote letters to each other. But that was it.

He opened the letter to see what it was this time.

To my dearest friend and lover,

How I have missed you! I have been delivering consignments and I happened to meet someone I knew ages ago. Talk about a blast from the past, right? It was my father. No, not the human one. He died a long time ago. It was my stepfather. The evil one. Ugh. Remember how I told you I was sold into slavery to this dragoman (the cooler name for a translator), who instead of using me as a slave turned me into a Strigoi—just for the fun of it? I hated him to the core, I tell you. Initially, being a Strigoi is cool, but immortality sucks, Sinbad.

You lose the people you love. So it's best not to get attached. That's why I'm loyal to just one thing and that's money. It will stay forever... like me.

Anyway, my stepfather wanted a favour. He needed some money, so he could escape to the sea because he was being chased by the Adam's Children. In short, it was the Roman vampire hunters chasing a Romanian vampire who was disguised as a translator in the Sultanate of Oman.

You know what the worst part is? He didn't even meet me during the ten years he lived in Oman. He only came to me when he needed something from me. So typical! I'm just done with people now. I still remember how he kicked me out of his home when I grew older... being like 'Hey, now I need a new child to entertain me', and he made another Strigoi and took care of her as if I was just a bloody standby.

Since then, I have been living alone.

Anyway, I gave him the money and asked him about the children he had adopted recently. And you know what he said? He said that the last one left him before he could as he wanted to explore the world and not hang out with an oldie. And I was like, Hah! Karma.

After that, that ass of a stepfather left and I am lonely again. In my cool house that I just rented. Sometimes being a Strigoi is lonely. Very lonely. I'm glad I met you and that we share this bond. What I loved about you was that you're an idealist, unlike me who's more cynical. You want to save the world. You want to save people.

You give me hope, Sinbad. You give me hope that not everyone is like my stepfather—selfish and cruel. I feel I'm a bad influence in your life, since I don't give you anything in return.

Do I?

Let me know.

Also tell me, how's it going on the other side?

Mwah!

There was a big kiss drawn at the end of the letter, which made Sinbad uneasy. He felt like he had two girlfriends now.

He sat down on the chair and wrote a response: Yes, you do. You give me warmth for someone who's so cold-blooded.

And then he wrote about his trip to the island, the giant bird and the girl he met recently.

He smiled to himself as he sealed the letter and walked to the cauldron beside the potion cabinet. He lit a candle that illuminated the room, tossed the letter into the cauldron and muttered a spell.

Instantly, the letter disappeared.

And it would reach Ashrafiyah soon.

This kind of spell was the easiest to learn in the Seid training. Seids weren't sorcerers and they could only perform non-lethal magic since they were easy to do. You just need to know the sigil, the sign and the chant, and the right way to speak it as well.

Sinbad kept contemplating the contents of Ashrafiyah's letter.

That he gave hope.

That he was idealistic.

And she was correct. He had talked about how he wanted to be the best hunter, fight monsters to save humanity and believe in the goodness of people. He did have a starry-eyed vision.

But somewhere inside him, he was worried about Safeena. He hoped she would be fine.

I have to at least check. She'd been gone a long time.

He took a deep breath and stepped out of the room, hoping that she was safe.

She will be, I'm sure, he thought. But he was lying to himself. He picked up the pace while walking towards the grand master's lodge.

FORTY

PRESENT DAY

They reached the island.

And the weird part was that it reminded Sinbad of that eerie feeling he had got four years ago, when he and his master had landed on an island.

Idris made sure the ship was anchored a few yards away from the shore, so in case they met with some other-worldly creature, the ship won't get damaged.

They took safety boats—one with Sinbad, Markus and his two men along with Husayn, who volunteered even though Markus disapproved and said, 'No! Weak.' Husayn didn't listen and Sinbad didn't quarrel, for he knew Husayn was feeling guilty about not being qualified to be part of the mission.

On the other support boat was Idris with more soldiers. Pressa didn't join. In fact, she said she would be happier not to be part of this life-and-death crusade since the wrecked ship looked like it was in a pretty bad shape, and whatever and whoever had done this was someone really powerful.

Ashrafiyah, on the other hand, kept it simple: 'I get paid to smell, not to venture out to deadly islands. Just stay safe so that you can return and pay me in full.'

Sinbad had expected that from the Strigoi and he didn't protest, even though Idris was unhappy with this.

They reached the shore, a few yards away from the wreck where the large vessel was leaning over on the sand—a lot of cargo had fallen into the sea, floating amidst the mangled bodies of the crew.

There were some dead bodies on the shore too. Sinbad went closer.

He knelt down, close to one of them and noticed their skin, their clothes. They seemed poor. Their skin had been scorched. The bones in their spines and legs were broken.

‘These are traders,’ Sinbad said to Idris and the crew, who were all studying the corpses. ‘This is not Safeena’s ship.’ He looked up to see the figurehead of the ship and it was of an ordinary kind. Nothing that said: ‘We are going to end the world’.

‘Yep,’ Idris replied. ‘Seems like they were hit by something huge. I wonder what.’

Sinbad and Husayn walked to the ship, trying to see if there were any survivors, when suddenly, they heard a voice.

Someone was singing a song.

The two friends shared a glance and went into the ship by pushing the debris to the side. They found a sickly-looking man, who had a huge beard, singing to himself. Sinbad saw some halfeaten apples and vegetables scattered about.

He looked up with bleary eyes at Sinbad and Husayn and continued to sing as if their presence didn’t astound him.

‘Hi,’ Sinbad said.

The man stopped singing and grinned, baring his half-broken teeth. ‘What a sight! What a marvel. What is this if not true sorcery?’

‘Who are you?’ Husayn asked.

‘A mate of the dead,’ he replied, looking befuddled.

‘Did all your friends die?’

‘Oh yes, they did. Creature destroyed the ship.’ He chuckled.

‘Some didn’t, some the creature took.’

Sinbad looked at Husayn and whispered, ‘He’s gone mad.’

Husayn patted him on the shoulder and said, ‘I’ll take care of it.’ He looked at the lunatic and asked sternly, ‘What creature?’

‘Massive. Huge. Like a big man.’

Big man?

Sinbad didn’t understand what he meant by that. He knelt down next to the man, asking, ‘Have you seen a girl with cat eyes?’

‘Cat eyes? Meowwwwwwww!’ The old man laughed at himself.

Sinbad gritted his teeth. ‘Have you?’

‘Yas. Yas. She came before you. It’s been days. Asking me about some stuff. Didn’t understand. She talked to captain.’

‘Captain of this vessel.’ Sinbad nodded. ‘Where’s he?’

And he hoped that the captain made it out alive, for he was the only lead to finding Safeena.

‘Dead.’ The lunatic cackled. ‘But alive too. Soon-to-be dead. With the creature perhaps. Entertains him. Dances. Sings with the other survivors. If the creature likes, he gives food in return. I couldn’t do any of it, so I hide.’ He continued cackling while clapping his hands together.

Husayn and Sinbad stepped out of the ship in total silence.

‘I believe there are a lot of survivors back in the jungle on this island,’ Sinbad said. ‘And Safeena must have come for some information that the

captain holds, but he’s tied up with the big man... I guess, entertaining him. I wonder if she came after the wreck or before.’

‘Must be after.’

‘But it seems the creature didn’t attack her. Why?’ Sinbad mumbled, confused. ‘Could it be that he sensed she was the Lord of the Dawn’s weapon and thus didn’t interfere in her business with the captain?’

Husayn added, ‘Or something else. We could never be sure.’

Sinbad nodded. They walked to Idris and Markus with the rest of the soldiers, who were still examining the cargo. Sinbad told them about the man inside and Idris told one of the soldiers to send a raven to the nearest port to pick the man up.

As he left, Sinbad was about to say something, but they felt sudden tremors. He knelt down and pressed his ear against the sand to feel the quakes. They came every two seconds and they were faint.

And then he noticed, the cause of the quakes ... when from the forest emerged a creature, holding a large mace made of iron and stone.

He walked on two legs.

He was clearly a man.

A very big man.

And then it hit Sinbad.

A giant!

He looked at all of them, beat his chest loudly and... ran towards them.

FORTY-ONE

FOUR YEARS AGO

She'll be flne.

He reassured himself as he walked to the grand master's lodge. The corridors had gone silent, unlike this morning when the place was swarming with young hunters. It was a starless night, but the moon shone in all its glory.

The courtyard gleamed under the shadows in the darkness and the dim glow of the torches in the corridors brought unwavering warmth to Sinbad.

He wasn't allowed to be out here so late at night. Apprentices were supposed to be in their cabins after 10 p.m. or they would get detention.

I hope I brought her to the right people. She trusted me and I am not even there with her right now.

He reached the grand master's lodge. The door was slightly ajar.

Sinbad felt relieved. He peeked inside and saw Master Reis leaning against a bookshelf. Standing near him was Grand Master Nasir, clad in long, multicoloured robes. The man was bald on the top of his head, but he had thick, white hair around his ears. He was leaning on a staff for support while looking at someone.

Sinbad turned his gaze and realized that there was a third person in the room. He couldn't make out who it was, but it was a bearded man with a thin face, low cheekbones and a huge turban around his head. He was in

robes as well, and he looked younger than all of them but wiser for some reason. He had a scrying mirror with which he studied Safeena, who was lying on abed.

‘Interesting, interesting,’ he mused, ‘her entire physiology is different. I can conclude we have someone who can be a boon for us.’

Was Safeena dead? She wasn’t moving. Sinbad became anxious when he saw her just lying there like a corpse.

‘The effect of the poppy seed tea will wear off in a few hours.’ The turbaned man said, ‘I must insist again that she should be taken to the caliph’s safe house.’

Master Reis interjected. ‘No.’ His voice was cold but strangely soothing. ‘The girl is close to my ward. It would be wrong to separate them.’

Sinbad smiled to himself, appreciative of Master Reis’s support towards him and his friendship.

‘All right then,’ the man said, ‘take her to a lodge and let her sleep for a few hours. She’ll be up and about tomorrow morning.’

They all began to move towards the door and Sinbad frantically shuffled backwards, hiding behind a wall in the darkness. Master Reis and the grand master came out with the turbaned man to bid him farewell. After he exited, the grand master turned to Reis.

‘I worry, Reis,’ the grand master said. ‘I worry a great deal.’ His voice seemed so old and sage-like.

‘I’m sure you don’t need to,’ Master Reis replied. ‘She’s a good girl. She’ll behave.’

‘What if she doesn’t? What if she’s a problem for us? She is, after all, Iblis’s weapon. He created her out of himself,’ the old man said.

‘Perhaps she’s innocent now, and that is why we can control her. But when she’ll be older, she will start to question our ways and soon she will fight us.’

‘As you said, she’s innocent. She’s like clay. And we can mould her anyway we want,’ Master Reis added.

‘Let’s hope you are right about her,’ the old man sighed and went back inside his lodge.

Master Reis left as well, unaware that his ward was hiding in the darkness.

Sinbad was glad.

He now knew that as long as Master Reis was there, Safeena would be safe.

FORTY-TWO

PRESENT DAY

Oggy hates! Oggy hates new people!’ the giant yelled while running wildly.

Sinbad and the crew scampered deep into the ravines of the jungle as the fallen leaves, barks and twigs crunched beneath their hurrying feet. They jumped and hid in the bushes.

The giant trailed behind. He was around 25 feet tall and had crafted his own weapon out of the stuff he had found. He was wearing loose rags and his body was riddled with scars. His hair was slimy and thin that fell to his thick shoulders and his eyes were big and loud.

‘Oggy demands your presence! Oggy asks where you are!’ The giant angrily stamped his feet.

Sinbad mouthed to Husayn to shut up when he saw he was about to say something about the ridiculous situation they were in. Husayn silently gulped. Sinbad knew how tough giants could be. To defeat one, you need to bait them and then hurt or torture them.

Their skin was harder than iron, and to kill them, one would need to find the softer areas of their body.

‘Oggy is angry!’ The giant flared his nostrils. ‘Oggy must speak to the Mal’ak for information.’

And then he left.

Sinbad looked at Idris and Markus who were with their men, all crouching furtively. ‘We need to follow him.’

‘Are you out of your mind? We need a plan first,’ Idris rasped softly.

‘Well, first, I don’t know about that. Second, we don’t have time for a plan. And third, he spoke of finding a Mal’ak. We need to see whether it’s Azrael or not. Now! Before we lose him.’

Idris grunted. ‘Markus, you go back to the shore and wait for us since it is better to be smaller in number in this situation. Husayn, you go—’

‘Nowhere. I am staying with Sinbad,’ Husayn snapped.

‘Fine.’ Idris gritted her teeth. ‘We don’t have time to argue. Let’s leave.’

They followed the footprints of the giant. They were huge and sank deep into the muddy ground. When they reached the last footprint, Sinbad peeked his head out of the bushes between the coconut tree groves and saw a small camp. He saw some strange furry creatures with long ears. They were hyenas, but they stood on two legs. Feral and dirty, they had thick muscles and large muzzles. They seemed to be far more intelligent than they appeared. Some were cooking food, some were sharpening their swords and the others were laughing hysterically.

Were-hyenas.

‘What are these creatures? Bismillah,’ Husayn muttered under his breath.

‘Cursed men who were turned into these half-hyena half-man creatures after they died. They serve the Lord of the Dawn, for he promises them their bodies back once he rises to prominence,’ Sinbad explained.

Idris whispered, ‘I hate them. They are smart and they are ravenous, and the three of us cannot fight them. Plus we need wolfsbane oil to actually defeat these hybrids. But do you see the giant and the angel? Wait, does it sound as ridiculous as it sounded to me? A giant and an angel?’

‘Well...’ Sinbad didn’t say anything for a moment, mulling it over. He continued, ‘He’s a fallen angel. So you could say “a giant and a fallen angel”. Now it doesn’t sound...’

‘Guys!’ Husayn cut him short. ‘Are we having this conversation for real? We are in a life-and-death situation. Let’s get back to work and focus!’

‘Fine, fine. I see the giant sitting on the other side of the camp,’ Sinbad said, looking at the large silhouette a few yards away. ‘We need to go around the camp area.’

‘Be careful then. Don’t step on the leaves,’ Idris said to Husayn and Sinbad. ‘Were-hyenas have sharp ears. If they hear the crunching of the leaves, they will attack.’

Both of them nodded. They treaded carefully through the groves, taking cover behind bushes and stealthily tiptoeing on the muddy ground, avoiding the fallen twigs and leaves.

Sinbad was near the last obstacle and he looked behind him to check on Husayn because he was prone to error, especially in this situation.

Let’s hope he doesn’t.

Sinbad saw the giant sitting on a big log, looking forlorn and frustrated. They continued walking in silence and almost made it when... Sinbad stepped on a leaf.

His heart sunk.

Husayn stopped dead.

And Idris looked at them with wide eyes.

Sinbad looked down and then at the camp where the were-hyenas were. Not many had heard it, except for one who walked towards Sinbad's direction.

Oh shoot!

Husayn grabbed Sinbad by the collar and pulled him towards a large shrub where they hid along with Idris.

The were-hyena stood near the shrub and sniffed the air, raising its furry brows. It growled under its breath as if the air was not to his liking and then walked back.

'He must have sensed us,' Idris said. 'But he probably thought he's overthinking. I mean it's an island...'

As soon as the were-hyena was not to be seen around, they stood up, shoulders hunched over, and moved quickly under cover of the tall trees to get a clearer view of the giant.

He was alone.

'Oggy demands Azrael's presence!' He stamped his feet and the earth quaked.

'I'm right here, King Og,' a voice came from somewhere and an image shimmered to reveal a man with jet-black hair. There was smoke coming out of his eyes and he had a clever smile on his face. Though he looked like a small doll in front of the giant.

'Oggy asks where you been?'

'To see our new visitors,' Azrael said. 'I hope you caught their glance as well.'

‘Oggy have seen them. They hid from Oggy.’

‘King Og ...’

‘It’s Oggy! Oggy has not been a king for a while. For a long time.’ He lowered his head in shame. ‘Ever since Oggy isolated himself, ever since he got the curse.’

‘Aw, come on now. You do great. You vandalize the ships that anchor this island and you make non-dancers dance.’

‘Oggy just wants friends.’ He paused. ‘Oggy doesn’t like killing. But human too small. Too small. Hurt them when Oggy doesn’t even want to.’

‘Well, you should. They deserve to. Because of them, you have lost your book,’ Azrael said.

‘Oggy talked to captain who is at his cave. Oggy is told that the captain has no clue about it.’

‘He lies. I’m sure he hid it. He just loves to trouble you, Og.’

‘Arrgh!’ Oggy stood up, beating his chest. ‘Oggy will kill everyone if he doesn’t get his book. Book is of importance. Very

big importance.’

‘I know. And as I promised, I will get it to you.’ Azrael tried to calm the giant. ‘But in return, I want you to kill our new friends.’

‘Oggy asks why?’

‘They are a hindrance.’

‘You know where the book is?’ Oggy asked with big eyes.

‘It’ll surely turn up when you do the work for me.’

‘Oggy suspects you.’ The giant narrowed his big eyes. ‘Oggy was told earlier the same thing when that cat-eyed girl came to ask the dancing captain something. Oggy allowed because you told Oggy that you’ll find the book.’

‘This time, I promise, Oggy. I do,’ Azrael said. ‘Though, technically, I said that if you let her come to the island, I will help you in finding the book. And I’m living up to the promise by stationing my guards here. Now, if you kill our new friends, I’ll be certain to give you the book. Cross my heart, hope to die.’

Oggy flared his nostrils. ‘Then killing it has to be. Oggy will go in the sea and attack their ship. Bring their corpses. You get busy too in finding the book.’

‘Will do, my friend. Off you go now.’

The giant left.

Sinbad, Idris and Husayn looked at each other in worry.

They knew one thing for sure—they had to race towards the ship before the giant did.

As they were sprinting, Sinbad said, ‘We need to find the captain who is at the cave and the only way to do that is by confronting the giant.’

‘So we need to defeat the giant?’ Husayn asked, panting.

‘I’m afraid so, and then get him to tell us the location. Unless, we find his book and negotiate a trade-off,’ Sinbad said.

They were at the shore.

‘And how do we plan to do that?’ Husayn asked. ‘Say open sesame and let it come to us?’

Sinbad grunted. He didn’t have a plan. And he usually did have something to work with. Seeing Azrael after so long had brought back bad memories of his past.

He made me do horrible things.

‘What if we do find his book? I’m sure he’ll be glad,’ Idris said. ‘He doesn’t seem fully evil.’

‘Always seeing the good in people.’ Sinbad chuckled. ‘No, but it’s a good plan. Let’s find his book.’

They saw Markus and his soldiers waiting with the support boats. They quickly went and sat in one and began to row towards their ship.

‘How do you plan to find the book?’ Husayn asked.

‘Well,’ Sinbad said, glancing at his mates, ‘there’s only one option—Pressa.’

FORTY-THREE

FOUR YEARS AGO

Sinbad hadn’t seen her in a few days.

Master Reis and Sinbad hadn’t been on any hunts either. They were staying at the guild because his master had a lot of stuff planned in the city —chores to do, some dealings to take care of and attending the council meeting to talk about the latest threats. But this meant that Sinbad had nothing to do most of the time except practise sword fighting and read books.

And miss Safeena, of course.

In the initial days, she was with him, but after a while, they stopped meeting. He didn’t know why. And whenever he would get the opportunity to ask Master Reis about it, he would say, ‘She’s practising and then she will rest.’

Practising for what? To become like me?

He didn’t know whether he was okay with the idea of Safeena being like him.

A Seid’s life is tough. And Safeena deserves the best, not the toughest. She’s already experienced enough ordeals for one lifetime. But then if she had consented to this, then why not? Did she say yes to this life? Or did they...

His restlessness grew with each passing day, until one day Master Reis opened his door to say: ‘Someone has come to meet you.’

Sinbad was reading, sitting next to the burning fireplace, when he instantly jumped from his cot and turned to the door. Master Reis opened the door a little more, letting inside Safeena.

She looked at Sinbad and gave him a warm smile.

‘I’ll leave you two alone,’ Master Reis said before closing the door behind him.

Sinbad took a step ahead, but before he knew it, Safeena hurled herself forward and embraced him tightly.

‘Been so long,’ she said.

He hugged her back. ‘How have you been?’

She pulled back to show her pale face and exhausted eyes. She looked thinner and weaker than before. And her eyes had sunk deep into her sockets. She shook her head.

‘What happened?’ Sinbad got worried and made her sit on the chair.

‘Weak. Very weak.’ She lowered her gaze.

Sinbad saw her fingertips. They were burnt.

‘Magic. Practising magic. Making me do things I never thought I could do,’ Safeena whimpered. ‘Don’t like. Hurts my insides.’

‘Did you tell Master Reis about it?’

‘Says it’ll be fine. Will get used to it. More than two weeks, not used to it,’ she sighed, her breathing staggered and heavy. ‘Not been outside. Not seen city. Not done anything but sleep and practise.’

Sinbad felt bad for her.

And he felt worse when she said, ‘Sinbad?’

‘Yes, Calypso.’

She smiled on hearing him call her by that name. ‘What difference between goat demon and human? Same thing?’

And it hit him.

The guild was making her do the same things and testing her powers the same way Leonard used to do.

‘Did they tell you why they are making you do all this?’

She shook her head. ‘Says, to test how strong I am.’

Sinbad sighed. ‘You want to leave?’

‘Can I?’ Her eyes filled with hope. ‘But where?’

Sinbad didn’t have an answer to that. ‘Let me think of something.’

‘Pleaded with them to meet you. They didn’t allow for days.

Waste of time, they said. Said you were busy.’

Sinbad clenched his jaw. He had no idea he was being lied about to Safeena. He felt extremely sad and hurt.

Perhaps Master Reis was not aware of this. Perhaps Safeena’s teacher was crueller than Reis. If given more time, Safeena would be fine. She’ll be happy.

‘You want to go out?’ Sinbad asked. ‘To see the city. The bazaar.’

‘Yes.’ She grinned. ‘Bangles. I want bangles. Seen girls wearing them here.’

Sinbad smiled. ‘Sure, let’s go. I know a passage in the rear that leads to the heart of the city. I found it a few years ago.’

They walked, holding hands.

Sinbad and Safeena found solace in the bazaar. In this moment, they were just two excited and curious kids running around from stall to stall and feeling delighted at seeing all the leather items, the jewellery, even the camels walking around them. There was a noisy, colourful hustle and bustle. The mesmerizing smell of cinnamon, lavender and fruits filled the air.

They explored the bazaar, but each step away from the guild made Sinbad worry. After all, he had sneaked her out and if Master Reis found out, he would detain him and Safeena as well.

‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ Sinbad asked.

‘A dressmaker,’ she said after contemplating. ‘I read in books. Queens wearing beautiful dresses. And they happy.

I make for them. To make them smile.’

‘Ah.’

‘You?’ she asked.

‘Um, I don’t know. I always thought I wanted to be like Heracles. You know, a hero.’

‘A hero?’ She burst out laughing.

Sinbad could see colour returning to her cheeks. ‘Yeah, well, I have not thought about it, and I am a hunter, so I suppose I’ll be that.’

‘Thought of anything else?’

‘Well, if given a choice, um... a sailor.’ Sinbad had never thought he would reveal this to someone. In fact, he didn’t think anyone would even care to ask him about this. ‘I love the sea, even though I kind of suffer from seasickness sometimes. But I love it. I love the breeze. I love the smell. I love how at night I can stand on the deck, taste the salty wind and feel the life beneath my feet.’

Safeena looked at him for a moment. ‘Then why don’t you?’ ‘What?’

‘Become sailor.’

‘It’s not that easy. My destiny has been chosen. I am a hunter.’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Don’t we choose our destiny? Why give power to someone else?’

Sinbad didn’t have an answer. She was correct, in her own way. ‘I, uh...’ He didn’t know what to say. Safeena didn’t mull over it and she pulled him towards a fruit cart.

‘Favourite fruit?’

‘I like apples,’ he said. ‘You?’

‘Strawberry. Island had great strawberry.’

The fruit seller—a man with a white beard, a hunchback and one eye—looked at them, leant closely and said, ‘You won’t find this kind of strawberry anywhere else, child.’ He had a wheezy voice. ‘Have some.’ He held out the purest and the reddest strawberries that they’d seen.

‘Don’t have money,’ she said.

‘Oh, don’t worry. It’s my treat for two lovely children.’ The fruit seller smiled.

Safeena gasped in amazement. She took the fruit from him and was about to take a bite when Sinbad stopped her.

‘We can have it later, Calypso,’ he said calmly. He didn’t like the seller; he thought there was something rather odd about him. Something not right.

‘Why?’ Safeena asked.

Even the fruit seller frowned.

‘Nothing. Just later. Come,’ Sinbad said, holding her hand tightly and walking away when he saw tall, dark men appearing on all four sides. These men wore vests and huge turbans. They had muscular and towering figures —they were clearly paid mercenaries.

The fruit seller spoke up, ‘Come, girl. Your time with the mortals is up.’

Safeena was confused. She looked at Sinbad for answers, who kept his gaze fixed on the fruit seller and said, ‘Azrael.’

‘Got me.’ The fruit seller grinned. ‘The child doesn’t belong there. She belongs with us. She is ours.’

‘She is no one’s,’ Sinbad said.

Safeena clutched at him.

The mercenaries came closer.

‘Well then, I am glad I hired these guards to take care of you.’ The fruit seller smirked.

Sinbad and Safeena tried to run, but the guards surrounded them. They tried to forcibly pull them apart, but Sinbad didn’t let go of her.

The public watched the spectacle, but no one interfered.

Until...

A slicing sound came out of nowhere.

Sinbad turned to see Master Reis, who in the blink of an eye slashed one of the mercenaries' thigh. The other three got scared and ran away, leaving behind the bleeding guard. The shocked crowd began to disperse and flee in all directions amidst a torrent of cries and screams.

Master Reis turned to face the fruit seller, but he had already vanished. Then he looked at Safeena and Sinbad.

And his eyes were flashing with rage.

FORTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY

He's coming,' Sinbad announced.

From a far-off distance, they could see him. The giant. He was walking around the shore to find a way to enter the sea and attack them. He was confused and kept yelling to himself, beating his chest.

'We don't have much time,' Idris shouted. 'Pressa! Sit on the blasted chair.'

Husayn had got a chair for the Chinese seer and placed it in the middle of the upper deck where all the crew members waited with bated breath.

Pressa's hands were dirty, her rags smelled of food and her hands were oily since she had been pulled out of the kitchen and brought to the front.

'Wh-what is it?' She was confused as she walked and sat down.

The roars of the giant were heard in the background.

Sinbad cursed under his breath as he sat down next to Pressa and said, 'I want you to find a book that belongs to this giant. Can you do that? Can you get us a location?'

Pressa nodded meekly. 'A book, erm, okay... Let's do this.' She tried to pump herself up by clapping her oily hands together. 'Let's do this, ge men.' And she closed her eyes, tightened her fists and began to focus.

Sinbad stood to his feet as he saw the giant enter the water and race towards them, braving the waves. He was so tall that even if he was in the depths of the sea, it would be okay since he'd be able to smack the ship and toss everyone into the water, making them drown.

'What should we do?' shouted Husayn.

Idris and Sinbad looked at each other.

They were running out of time.

Pressa was still trying to look for the book and her eyes were shut. She had started bleeding from the nose.

Markus screamed, 'Attack!'

'No!' Sinbad hollered. 'We will anger him more.'

'Angrier than this?' Idris asked.

'Yes. We can't make him a threat to us. We need to buy time.' An idea struck him and he turned to Husayn. 'Have you brought your instrument?' he asked, referring to the oud.

'Yes.' Husayn was confused. 'Aphrodite is in my cabin.'

'Now's the time to get it.'

'Why? So I sing while we drown?'

'Just bring the damn instrument, man!'

Husayn nodded, trusting his friend. The waves were growing strong as the giant waded the waters, his huge mace ready to pound whoever was out there. Husayn quickly came out with his oud.

'What should I do now?'

'Play,' Sinbad instructed.

‘Are you sure about this?’ Idris asked from behind.

‘Yes,’ Sinbad lied.

Husayn nodded and started strumming and singing a bard. His voice had a soothing effect because as soon as the giant came closer, swinging the mace, he heard the bard and stopped. He shot a confused glare over at Husayn. Then he put the mace down and a smile came to his face. ‘Music. Good music.’ Husayn smiled back as well, as if he was singing a lullaby to a little boy.

Idris appeared beside Sinbad’s. ‘What just happened?’

‘Remember that madman said that the people the giant captures entertain him? Husayn is the perfect candidate! The giant has been distracted for now, but he’ll be back to his plan of killing us,’ Sinbad explained. He then turned to Pressa. ‘Come on, girl. Do your magic.’

And then she opened her eyes, gasping for air. ‘The book... It’s with... someone who has his wings cut off, like ripped apart by some powerful force. I saw his back. He had huge scars and he was holding the book.’

Sinbad immediately understood. He directed Husayn to stop the music, and when he did, the giant came out of the trance—looking angrier than before.

‘Oggy kill all except funny music man!’

‘Well, I expected something like “exceptionally talented, prodigious man”, but this will have to do,’ Husayn grunted.

Sinbad went to the very end of the deck while the entire crew watched in anticipation. ‘Oggy, we know where the book is. Oggy darling.’ He grinned, trying to put on a cheerful demeanour despite knowing that the giant could throw him into the sea with a flick of his fingers.

The giant towered over the ship and peered down while they all watched him in awe and fright. ‘Book? You have it? “Darling”?’

‘Yes, darling. We know where it is.’

‘Where?’

‘With Azrael. The fallen angel you have been helping.’

‘The Mal’ak,’ he said quietly.

‘He’s more like a fallen Mal’ak.’

‘Oggy doesn’t care. Oggy asks—you sure?’

‘A hundred per cent.’

‘Don’t believe. Oggy has been lied enough by the Mal’ak,’ he said, growling at them.

‘I can promise you that I’ll get the book.’ Sinbad smiled.

Oggy looked at him, blinking. ‘If not?’

‘You can kill us all.’

‘Humph.’

‘But if I get it, I want to speak to the captain.’

‘Like the cat-eyed girl?’

‘Yes,’ Sinbad said.

‘Humph. She had a strange trumpet with her.’

Sinbad’s smile faltered. In all this mayhem, he had forgotten that it was all about the trumpet. He had to bring the trumpet back from her and return it to the caliphate. ‘Let’s do that, shall we?’

‘Book very important. Oggy wants book. The only book to speak of his grand wonders. Oggy was once King Ogias of Bashan but lost in Battle

of Edrei. Was cursed by the usurper to be a giant and live far away from civilization. Oggy was bad man. And the punishment fit Oggy's crime. Oggy wrote a book, back when he was human. It was called The Book of Heroes by Ogias and it was about how Oggy slayed the dragon before his curse. It's the only memory Oggy has of him when he was normal. The book was his friend. Now...' his voice grew hoarser, 'Oggy doesn't have his book and he uses interesting humans as friends. If book is given, Oggy will be a peaceful giant. Promise from Oggy.'

'Thank you, Oggy. I will make sure you get that book. After suffering so much, you deserve this.' Sinbad smiled.

'If that Mal'ak has Oggy's book and you prove it by bringing it to Oggy, he will kill every last one of them, even the Mal'ak.'

'I like the sound of it, Oggy.'

The giant nodded. He felt happy that he had made a deal with the mortals. Idris and Husayn patted Sinbad on the back, the rest of the crew clapped and cheered for him for negotiating so calmly. Oggy began to walk away, but he turned around to say, 'Oh, also, you only have time till sunset.'

Sinbad's smile vanished. This is a problem.

FORTY-FIVE

FOUR YEARS AGO

Sinbad was in Master Reis's study.

He was alone, his head bent with shame and hands clasped behind his back. Sinbad didn't know how to explain his audacious behaviour. He wanted the silence that had crept between them to be sliced apart. He wanted to speak but was at a loss for words.

His eyes wandered around the room and he saw the head of a werewolf against the wall. It was his master's first kill.

A werewolf was a powerful foe that was difficult to kill because it kept regenerating.

'Do you have anything to say?' Master Reis asked.

'I apologize.'

'You risked her life and yours,' Reis said, his voice cutting like ice. 'You do realize Azrael is on her trail. He's waiting for an opportunity like this. You should be glad that I was there on my way to a meeting when I saw you both. It was pure coincidence.'

'I'm sorry.'

Master Reis shook his head. 'Sometimes you make me proud of you, boy, and sometimes you disappoint me.'

‘I was worried for her.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She is weak. The guild is making her practise too much. She is losing energy.’

‘That’s her work now, Sinbad. She has been created as a powerful entity and we need to utilize her power for the good of the people,’ Reis explained.

‘But does she have any safety? Is she safe?’

‘You kids have a curse of impracticality.’ He pushed his chair back, his eyes wide with fury. ‘She possesses the strength of a hundred soldiers, if we utilize it, we can defeat the Lord of the Dawn and every creature in this world. We will be rid of evil. That has been our job since time immemorial. It is our duty.’

‘Our duty was also to care.’

‘For the innocent. She’s the Devil’s weapon and now she is ours.’ And when he said it, his voice became calm as if he himself liked hearing these words, as if they made him feel content.

‘Weapon? Ours? She’s a girl, master. Just a girl...’

Master Reis turned, his tightened expression showing his annoyance. ‘It was a mistake to let you two get so close. It’s my fault.’

Sinbad wanted to protest, but he remained silent, tightening his fists. He hated the disappointment in his master’s voice, but at the same time didn’t like what was happening to Safeena. There was a sudden knock at the door.

‘Come in,’ Master Reis said.

A man who had a thick beard but no moustache and a turban on his head entered the room. He held a scrying mirror in his lanky fingers. It was

the same man ... the third person in the room who Sinbad had seen earlier.

‘Reis, we need to speak,’ he rasped.

‘Physicker ibn-Al-Amir.’ Master Reis straightened up. ‘What can I do for you?’

The physicker looked at Sinbad. His eyes were filled with hatred, but he maintained a stoic expression. ‘The caliph heard about the little accident in the street. He cannot risk this happening again. And as the chief physicker, it’s my duty to execute his will.’

‘No, wait.’ Reis came forward. ‘What will? She’s safe here.’

‘She might be safe from the demons of other worlds, Reis.’ Then his eyes fell on Sinbad. ‘But she’s not safe from this boy.’ He paused. ‘We are taking her to the new palace of the caliph in the outskirts of Baghdad, in Raqqa-Rafiqa where she will continue her practice. Good day to you both!’

And he stormed off.

FORTY-SIX

PRESENT DAY

They didn't have a lot of time left, give or take a few hours.

In the captain's lodge back again were Sinbad leaning against a wall, Pressa sitting on a stool, Husayn flipping a coin nervously, Ashrafiyah standing with arms crossed and casually leaning against the door, grim-faced Markus with his arms behind his back and Idris standing behind the captain's desk, pursing her lips.

'What should we do?' The captain initiated the discussion.

'I say we go with a large army and destroy the hyena hybrids,' Markus suggested. 'We have more than fifty soldiers at our disposal.'

'And we might have to use them when there is an actual need,' Idris added, shaking her head. 'Fighting were-hyenas is tiresome and foolhardy.'

'Can we sneak up to them?' Husayn asked.

'No,' Sinbad said. 'They have heightened hearing—can't challenge that.'

Idris looked at Ashrafiyah. 'I have an idea. Care to help, Strigoi?'

'What do you want from me?'

'Something unconventional.' With a hint of a smile dancing upon her lips, Idris continued, 'You are a Strigoi Viu, which means you are a vampire sorceress. What if we do sneak up to Azrael's camp but wear disguises?'

‘I’m a sorceress, not a dressmaker,’ she said, dismissing the suggestion. ‘I can’t make wings.’

‘But you can change us into animals for the time being.’ Idris smiled.

Ashrafiyah straightened up, her eyes darting wildly. ‘You want to try therianthropy? That is one painful process.’ Then she added thoughtfully, smiling, ‘I can do that for a while though. But only two people. I don’t have the energy to do it on more.’

‘Hmmm, I can’t be part of it. Sorry, captain,’ Markus said. ‘I can’t let magic be put on me or in my blood.’ He spoke so nervously as if sorcery was something he was afraid of more than the monsters he had faced throughout his life.

The crew member on which Sinbad had the least amount of information was Markus, and he was curious to know more about him once he got off this island safely.

‘I can do it,’ Sinbad added. ‘I have done it before to get some intel on a certain monster I was hunting.’

Pressa sighed. ‘I ain’t turning into an animal, people. I am happy with how I look.’

Idris was about to stand up and say it, but Husayn came forward. ‘I would like to volunteer.’

‘No,’ Idris said. ‘It’s too dangerous. If Azrael gets a whiff that these animals are us, we’ll be in trouble.’

‘She’s right,’ Sinbad added. ‘We can fight back...’

‘And I can’t, right?’ Husayn’s eyes flashed with anger before he stormed out of the room.

Idris eyed Sinbad and he nodded in return. He followed Husayn towards the upper deck where Husayn was furiously rubbing the coin that he always kept flipping.

‘Don’t take your anger out on the coin,’ Sinbad said.

‘My father gave it to me,’ Husayn said. ‘Right before he went to the battle and never came back. He said a man makes his own fortune. And with this coin, I should make mine.’ Husayn sighed, looking up at Sinbad. ‘He was a brave man, but he said wars are for fools with egos. He knew I wouldn’t fit there, and that’s why he wanted me to make money and live a good, rich life.’

‘And he went to war after saying that?’

‘Yeah, well, he was a fool too,’ Husayn scoffed. ‘Stupid man, leaving his son all alone.’

‘I know. But sometimes in the process of doing the right thing, we have to let go of the right people,’ Sinbad said. He wished he could remember who his father was, but he couldn’t and he knew whenever the memory of his parents would come to him, it would hurt him even more. ‘And what was all that about in front of everyone? I’ve never seen you like this.’

‘I don’t know. I just feel like I’m a loser here.’

‘You’re not.’

‘Come on, I’m just excess baggage. I want to be useful. But Markus is right. I’m weak,’ Husayn sighed. ‘I want to fight, man.’

Sinbad said, ‘I thought you didn’t want to be like your father.’ ‘Well, I was wrong. I want to be like him. I’m proud of my father and I don’t admit that often. The man lost his life for his nation and that is a thing to be proud of,’ Husayn said. ‘Everyone remembers him while his son is not remembered for anything.’

Sinbad put his arm around his friend’s shoulder and said, ‘You need to realize, Husayn, that this mission is not just about you proving your worth. There’s a lot happening here. And if you want to do something worthwhile,

you will get an opportunity. Unfortunately, this is not the time. I’m sorry, brother.’

Husayn didn’t say anything and left.

Sinbad wanted to comfort his friend, but he knew he didn’t have time.

He had to metamorphose into an animal.

Sinbad soared.

Literally.

He had wings and an odd-looking beak. Instead of words, he was communicating by making a high-pitched whistling sound whenever he wanted to say something.

Ashrafiyah had put a spell on Idris and Sinbad, turning them into birds. And their transformation was indeed hurtful as it contorted their bodies and turned them into bald eagles. The only way they could return to their human form was if someone said their name.

Idris was gliding by Sinbad’s side majestically as if turning into an eagle was part of her everyday life.

Sinbad, on the other hand, was having a hard time with his new-found arms, which he kept flapping awkwardly as they reached the camp.

From above, he could see the were-hyenas, but he couldn’t find Azrael anywhere.

Idris made a whistling sound, which Sinbad clearly understood: ‘Let’s sit on the branch and wait for him.’

Sinbad nodded, flapping his wings as the breeze was chilly and it felt nice against his feathers. They perched, facing each other, and looked down at the camp. Nothing unusual was happening except the hybrids going about their daily routine, which Sinbad had last seen.

‘Whichever tent Azrael gets out of, one of us will swoop in and get the book. The author name written on it has to be King Ogias— that’s how we will recognize it,’ Sinbad said.

‘I will sweep in and you stay here, see if anything fishy happens,’ Idris replied.

‘Great. I’m your lookout,’ Sinbad grunted, which came out as a wheeze.

The hybrids looked up at them, blinking and resumed working after a few seconds.

‘Do you think they noticed something odd about us?’ Idris asked.

‘Probably wondering why two eagles have been chit-chatting for so long. Why don’t we just pretend to be birds for a while instead of talking like humans?’

Idris nodded.

They waited until Azrael came out of his tent. Then suddenly, they became alert when he came into sight. He looked relaxed and there was no smoke coming out of his eyes. Instead, he looked like a pretty normal person—tall guy, broad frame, clean-shaven, pale face and black silky hair oiled back. He had deep eyes and a sharp nose.

‘Go in,’ Sinbad said.

Idris nodded and left. She flew behind Azrael so he wouldn’t notice and entered the tent while Sinbad remained hawk-eyed lest Azrael did

anything. He saw Azrael talking to some hybrids and laughing as if he'd made a joke. The were-hyenas were laughing as well. But then he began to walk towards the tent.

Dam! I can't let him go inside.

Sinbad flew down and pecked furiously at one of the hybrids' head, who tried to get the eagle out of his hair frenziedly amidst shrieks. Azrael got distracted and turned around. Sinbad kept at it for a while until the hybrid got irritated and pulled out its weapon to attack Sinbad, who then flew up ...

Only to be caught by Azrael.

The fallen angel was tightly clutching his talon.

From the corner of his eye, Sinbad saw Idris with the book in her beak. She looked around and gave Sinbad a sympathetic look, nodding as if to tell him that she'll return for him, and then flew off.

Let's hope she comes back.

Azrael held Sinbad by the wings.

He, however, tried to act like any other bird.

'Ah, what a creature. Such beauty, this eagle is,' Azrael smiled and said to the hybrid who'd just been pecked at. 'It's a shame that it's not an actual eagle.'

Sinbad's blood ran cold.

'After all, this island hasn't had a bird for the longest time. So I wonder who this might be,' Azrael said, his eyes peering into the frightened eyes of Sinbad. 'I know these eyes. I know your eyes, kid.'

He paused and said, 'Hello, Sinbad.'

And the kid turned human again, with the hand of the fallen angel wrapped around his neck.

FORTY-SEVEN

FOUR YEARS AGO

They watched the possessed woman.

Sinbad was in the corner as Master Reis studied the demon, who was yelling and screaming at him. The woman was old, her eyes had gone all white and lines of veins popped out of her skin. Her arms and legs were tied to the four posts of the bed.

‘It’s a standard ghoul,’ Master Reis said dismissively.

They had gone to Mosul in a little mountainous village of Hatra, where they sat in one of the many mud-brick and clay building houses located on a hilltop. The woman in front of them had become possessed one day after a trip to a nearby well to draw water. Apparently, there was a ghoul around the well and it had possessed her.

There were some more details, but Sinbad didn’t care. His mind was still occupied with thoughts of Safeena. It had been over two weeks since she was shifted to the caliph’s palace to be the nation’s weapon.

He hadn’t spoken to Master Reis or to anyone about this. He didn’t feel like it. He just felt so angry and betrayed.

Master Reis had his book of chants from which he was reading out so that the ghoul would leave the woman’s body. There wasn’t much to do. The ghoul was a minor demon, otherwise he would be able to communicate with Sinbad and Reis. And that took time. Here, it was just so minor that it would be very easy to pull it out.

‘You know the protocol. If anything fishy happens, attack her,’ he said, giving the thokcha sword to Sinbad. ‘It obeys you now. Remember? Use it wisely.’

Sinbad nodded. He wasn’t frightened by the possessed woman who was just talking gibberish. It seemed like nothing mattered any more.

‘If we are able to do it,’ Sinbad said, after a long silence, ‘what are the chances of her survival? She’s old. She can’t survive an exorcism, right?’

‘Well...’ Master Reis said, ‘you are right. She can’t. But we should at least try. We can’t just...’

And at that moment, Sinbad unsheathed the blade and plunged it deep into the woman.

She screamed and light flickered in her eyes before going out completely, extinguished, with the demon dying as well.

Master Reis was taken aback. His hands shook where they held the book. ‘What... You can’t just...’

‘She would have died anyway, master.’ Sinbad sheathed the blade and presented it to Reis. ‘I just sped up our work.’

‘We aren’t killers.’

‘We are. Of monsters. I just killed one,’ Sinbad said blandly.

‘What will we tell her worried family members standing outside?’ Reis was still astonished as he took the blade from Sinbad.

Sinbad sighed. He hadn’t figured that part out. But then, he had the perfect answer to give to Master Reis—since he had promised Safeena she would be safe, but she was being tortured every day.

‘What we Seids always do. We will lie.’

It was late at night and after a lot of lies, Sinbad and Master Reis had got themselves two rooms at an inn. They would leave for Baghdad the next day.

Sinbad sat in his room, eating an apple and just blankly staring at the ceiling, the nothingness, when he heard a voice:

‘Having a moral crisis, aren’t you? Hehe.’

Sinbad pulled himself up into the bed to see where the voice had come from. Then in front of him, in the darkness, appeared two smoky white eyes looking at him. A cloud of smoke billowed from their corners. ‘AzraeL’ Sinbad staggered to his feet and reached for the weapon in his rucksack that was kept on the side table.

‘No need to hurt me, kid. I’ve come here as a spirit,’ Azrael said. ‘To communicate with you.’

‘What do you want?’

‘You know what I want?’ the eyes said. ‘I want Safeena.’

Sinbad scoffed, ‘And you think I’ll just hand her to you?’ ‘She’ll be safer with me, kid. Ugh, the torture your people are inflicting on her! She’s weak. If you don’t believe me, go and meet her. You’ll see for yourself.’

Sinbad clenched his jaw. ‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Of course, you don’t. Though remember that I’m an angel, albeit a fallen one, but an angel nonetheless. I know you like her, kid. Don’t let her get hurt by the mortals. She deserves better.’

‘Like what you provided her with? Leonard?’

‘Oh, he was a mistake,’ the gravelly voice replied. ‘And I apologize for that, even though she had more freedom to roam around on the island than being stuck in one fort under the protection of the caliph’s men.’

‘You killed her family.’

‘They were an adoptive family, kid. She is Iblis’s daughter.’

‘A weapon.’

‘He likes to call her his daughter,’ he said. ‘Come on, kid. The Lord of the Dawn will do anything for his child’s happiness, even if it involves you, a mortal. He will surely promise your union with Safeena when you both reach a certain age. Of course, for that you would have to hand her over to me.’

Sinbad thought about it. He liked the idea of her being out of that prison that he himself was responsible for. He hated himself for that. ‘But here, her powers are being used for the right reasons by the right people. She will realize she’s doing things for the good of the people.’

‘Humph, lies,’ Azrael said. ‘Sinbad, my boy, didn’t you ever think why an angel, even a fallen one like me, joined Iblis’s cause? Do you even know what he plans to do with our Earth? He plans to make it better for you —a paradise, a utopia, without the flaws you mortals have enriched yourselves with. You have all become useless and you need someone who can check on you. And for that, he just has one sacrifice to make, which is to kill the sinners of this world and let the good survive.’

‘Sinners? So you feel you are doing a good thing by supporting this?’

‘Of course. Sinners like Reis will perish.’

Sinbad protested, ‘Master Reis ... He’s a good man.’

‘Who betrayed his only ward.’

‘What? What are you saying?’ he gulped, a knot forming in his stomach.

Azrael chuckled. ‘You think it was the caliphate who decided to take Safeena away... far away from you? Nah, kid,’ he said. ‘It was Master Reis’s idea.’

FORTY-EIGHT

PRESENT DAY

Sinbad was trapped in a bamboo cage as the ravenous were-hyenas and the fallen angel peered at him with utmost delight from outside.

‘My old friend,’ Azrael spoke in his smooth deep voice. ‘You’ve grown a bit. What about me? Have I become flabbier?’ He tried to show himself off, turning a full circle, but Sinbad knew he was joking.

Sinbad sat down, looking straight at the fallen angel. His eyes met his and Azrael grinned slyly. Sinbad couldn’t believe how happy this person actually was to see him.

‘I never expected that you would come up with a plan like this. To do what? Spy on me? Were you wondering what I’m doing here? Well, I was trying to stop you, to start with, which I clearly did.’ He chuckled. ‘I’m so glad you fell into my lap... or clutches, to be more precise,’ Azrael said, flexing his fingers, which he had used to grab Sinbad’s neck.

Sinbad didn’t want to say that he was having the last laugh since Idris had the giant’s book. ‘What are you doing with Safeena?’

‘Oh dear. Who am I to interfere? What she wants to do, she’s doing, just with a little bit of guidance from me.’

‘Why was she here?’

‘To know about something,’ Azrael said, innocently blinking his eyes.

‘To go where?’

‘Do I really look like someone who will reveal my world domination plan?’ Azrael laughed. ‘I feel bad that you think of me as so simple-minded.’

Sinbad said angrily, ‘She’s a good girl, Azrael. And she’s seen enough grief in this lifetime ... This world has been unfair to her. Safeena doesn’t deserve any of this.’

‘That’s why she knows this world needs to be rebuilt, and who better than her father to do it? He will punish all the sinners and a new world—a just world—will rise. And Safeena will have avenged herself. Don’t you think she deserves justice for all the pain your lot put her through?’

Sinbad sighed. ‘You want to release Iblis with the trumpet?’

‘His brother,’ Azrael said. ‘Iblis is weak. You know he is. You’ve known for quite some time, haven’t you? So he put all his remaining energies into making Safeena. He knows only his brother can help him.’

The Beast.

‘Only what made him sleep can awaken him from the blood of his own,’ Azrael said, as if reading some prophecy since the words came out so mechanically. He continued, ‘Safeena knows how this world is so ... broken.’ Azrael walked around the cell blithely. ‘She knows that there are some pretty messed-up people who need to die. There has to be a judge.’

‘And that judge will be the Beast?’

‘Of course,’ Azrael said.

Sinbad didn’t know where the Beast was buried, otherwise he himself would have gone straight there rather than waste time here. But the captain of the trading vessel knew where he was, so that was one mystery Sinbad had to solve. What information did she need from the captain?

‘So to achieve that, you’ll eliminate all of mankind?’ Sinbad said.

‘A small sacrifice for a purpose so big.’

‘You don’t believe in this. You are only doing this to spite him.' Sinbad smiled.

Azrael’s cheeky grin vanished. He almost whispered, ‘You shouldn’t have said that. I told you that in confidence, Sinbad.’

‘Well, I understand where you’re coming from, Azrael. I do.’ The Angel of Death looked at Sinbad and yelled: ‘You don’t!’ His pupils enlarged, darkening his eyes eerily. Sinbad’s heartbeat rose. For the first time in a long time, Azrael looked threatening for just a few seconds before his cheeky self seemingly returned. ‘You don’t understand. No one does. I might spite him. I might even hurt him. But you know what? Over the years, I have grown to believe what Iblis wants, and it makes sense. So much sense.’

‘Why have you trapped me then? Kill me.’ Sinbad stood up. ‘I’m so done with it all.’

‘I can’t.’

Sinbad arched his brows. ‘Why?’

‘Well... I don’t want you to feel nice about it, but...’ Azrael said, ‘the only reason Safeena agreed to fulfil her destiny, since she’s eighteen years old now, is that she asked for one ridiculous request and that was to spare you, only you. You two will be the only people who will continue to walk in Iblis’s new world.’

‘What...’ Sinbad didn’t know what to feel. He had thought she might have forgotten about him, but she ... He wanted to smile, but something stopped him. ‘And this Iblis ... He doesn’t want to show up on Earth to do all this himself?’

‘As I told you, he’s too weak. He lives in Qliphoth. And he has people like us working for him and someone like Safeena to do exactly what she was born to do: bring the Dark Age and bring forth the new world.’

Sinbad clenched his fist. ‘I won’t let you do it.’

‘Why are you saying this?’ Azrael sat down on the ground, making a sad face. ‘I mean... I know your secret, Sinbad.’

‘You mean about my parents?’

Azrael smiled. ‘Come on, that is something you should know. But I will tell you once all this is over.’ He paused. ‘But not this secret, no. It’s something else. You know what I’m talking about.’

His blood ran cold when it dawned upon him. ‘How dare you? How did you...’

‘She told me.’ Azrael shrugged. ‘She felt bad about it and it was like a confession. I’m a good shoulder to cry on.’

Sinbad trembled, clutching his head. Safeena, why did you?

‘I will stop you, Azrael.’

‘How?’ He looked around for any threats. ‘I don’t see anyone here. And your crew with your ship made of elfwood? I’m sending my men to kill them. They’ve located them.

I mean it is a big ship near an island of all places.’

‘Azrael.’ Sinbad looked up. ‘I will never turn if you or even Safeena thinks so.’

‘You will, eventually.’ Azrael had a triumphant smile. ‘After all, she turned too and—’

The ground began to shake. Sinbad and Azrael looked in all directions to figure out why this was happening when...

From the forest, the giant entered!

He swung his mace around the tents, breaking them apart, beating the were-hyenas to a pulp. He then tore their bodies in half—their torsos tumbling everywhere—and broke their limbs as if they were dolls.

Sinbad stepped back, his eyes widened. Even Azrael was shocked.

‘Oggy hates all of you! You stole Oggy’s book!’ he yelled.

Azrael then quickly stood in front of Oggy and said, ‘What happened, my darling?’

‘You stole it!’ The giant scowled, picking up Azrael by the arm to snap it into two when Azrael poofed out into thin air. ‘Magician! Arrrrrgghhhh!’

He continued to destroy the place when Sinbad saw Husayn come out of the bushes. Behind him were Markus and the soldiers.

As they came to open the cage amidst the chaos, more were-hyenas entered with their swords.

Markus turned to face them, taking his huge axe out while his soldiers readied their sharp scimitars.

‘Attack!’ Markus yelled as he ran at full force and launched himself at the were-hyenas. Meanwhile, Husayn was busy trying to open the cage, tearing the knots of the bamboo door with his blade.

‘You are right on time.’ Sinbad smiled. ‘Thanks for coming.’ ‘Well, I had to. Idris said you were in danger.’

‘She didn’t come?’ Sinbad was surprised.

‘You think I wouldn’t come out for a battle?’ Idris entered from behind with her double-sided spear, as she did a handspring forward and started attacking the were-hyenas along with Markus. She winked at Sinbad, who grinned in return.

It was chaos with the clanking of steel on steel and then the giant who was busy hurling the other hybrids while talking to himself. And in the middle was Husayn, who was just about to open the cage when a hybrid lurched forward at him and began to gnaw at his face. Husayn put his blade between them as he tried to push the hybrid with the other hand. With one

massive push, he successfully threw the hybrid off and stood up. The hybrid growled at him and then came forward. With a quick movement of his feet, Husayn turned, dodging the attack.

Come on, brother. Don’t die fighting this creature. Sinbad rattled the door.

The were-hyena put up his claws to come at Husayn and attack like a monster, but without wasting time, Husayn slid between the hyena’s wide feet, jumped up in the air, stabbed his sword straight through his back and instantly pulled it out. The hybrid looked at the wound in confusion and then collapsed.

Husayn came back to the cage and opened the door. Sinbad hugged him and clasped his cheeks. ‘You did it!’

‘I had my first kill.’ His eyes were bloodshot and he was flustered.

‘You are feeling absolutely crazy right now, aren’t you?’

‘You have no idea. Everything just happened so fast.’

‘I’m sure your father would be proud.’

‘Why? Because I killed someone?’

Sinbad smiled. ‘No. Because you saved a friend.’

Husayn smiled back.

They turned to see the spectacle of the broken tents and the corpses of the hybrids unfurled like tapestry.

Idris and Markus stood with their weapons. One of Markus’s men had died and the soldiers stood around him, heads bowed. Oggy was still yelling angrily about how they had stolen the book.

Sinbad and Husayn walked to Idris.

‘I suppose you told him,’ Sinbad said, pointing to the giant.

‘Oh, he was not happy.’ Idris felt queasy. ‘Did Azrael die?’

‘He escaped.’ Sinbad gritted his teeth. ‘That slimy... Anyway, we really need to hurry! They plan to break the gates of hell so the Beast can end this world. Once the trumpet is blown, we will have no chance.’

Idris went pale. So did Husayn and Markus.

‘I have a question. Didn’t the trumpet put the Beast to sleep?’ Husayn asked. ‘I mean, isn’t he still sleeping? I thought that was the original myth.’

‘Well,’ Sinbad said, ‘apparently the trumpet is also the only item that can wake the Beast up. And the only one who can wake him up is Safeena, who comes from the blood of the Beast and the Lord of the Dawn.’

Idris nodded. ‘Makes sense. We don’t have time then.’

They all turned to Oggy who was sitting on the ground, fiddling with the wreckage.

‘Hey, Oggy! We got the book; it’s kept safe back at the ship. Now take us to the captain.’

Oggy looked up, his eyes shining. ‘Oggy never forgets his promise.’ He stood up with a little quake, making Sinbad and his friends fall to the ground. ‘Oggy make you meet dancing captain!’

FORTY-NINE

THREE YEARS AGO

Months had passed since Sinbad had put in a request to meet Safeena. But no answer had been given.

He was getting agitated. He wanted to sneak in, but going to Raqqa-Rafiqa and entering a palace that belonged to the caliph is next to impossible. First, there were boundaries set by the mages, then there were Seids protecting the inner rim besides the guards patrolling the place.

And he was just thirteen years old. He couldn't do it alone.

He could, though, take the help of Azrael, which he didn't want to. He didn't trust the fallen angel. Even when he said that Master Reis was responsible for separating Sinbad and Safeena from each other. He had gone to different missions with his master and fought different sorts of beasts and monsters. He was getting proficient at his craft as a Seid until a day came when a younger apprentice had been chosen by Master Reis.

And Sinbad's time had come. Master Reis stood in front of him in his room, with a reward for his pupil.

'You have been doing exceptional work,' Master Reis said. 'I'm proud of what you have accomplished. You have managed to leave emotions out of your job and have become more focused. And for that, I'm going to give you something. It might be premature to do so, but I believe you are ready for it,' he said, giving Sinbad one of his rare smiles.

He presented him a wide brown box made of leather.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Sinbad opened it. There was a curved silver sword inside. He knew what it was called—a scimitar.

‘Well?’ Master Reis asked.

Sinbad grinned, holding the hilt and noticing his name engraved on the blade. ‘I am too young to wield a weapon, you had said.’

‘You have impressed me recently, boy. I believe you deserve this.’

Sinbad nodded, standing up and trying to sword fight with an invisible enemy. He watched his footwork and his arm to see how well he was doing. Then he stopped, bowed to his master. ‘Thank you.’

‘There were doubts about you when I got you in the guild,’ Master Reis began, standing next to Sinbad, his hands resting on his shoulders. ‘But you always removed them.’

Sinbad was glad. He couldn’t believe that the very man who was being so soft-natured with him right now was also a very selfish man at times. He was complex. And Sinbad didn’t know what to feel for him. Master Reis turned around to keep the empty box on his table when Sinbad said:

‘I need to request something from you.’

‘Yes?’

‘I want to meet Safeena.’

Reis clenched his jaw. ‘Why?’

‘It’s been months, master. I believe it’s time I met her. I’d even put a request to the grand master, but there has been no response. Please let me meet her. I want to see how she’s doing.’

‘All right.’

‘What?’

‘Fine. I said all right.’

Sinbad jumped into the air with enthusiasm and rushed to thank Reis, hugging his leg. Reis smiled at this gesture and patted him on the head.

Behind them, the sword that Reis had gifted him was tossed on the ground.

Sinbad waited excitedly for Safeena.

It had been a few months since he had seen her and now he felt anxious about meeting her. What would he say to her? He had no clue. He was put in a room, after travelling to Raqqa-Rafiqa. And he saw how well guarded the palace was.

The room was simple with two chairs and a table in the middle. There was no one else here. A window let in some breeze in the room. The season had become cold and he could feel the chilliness.

That Azrael—he must have been lying and I’ll get the proof right now. Safeena is fine. I’m sure of it.

He assured himself.

The door opened. Dressed in a long skirt and a tight tunic, Safeena entered the room. Her face looked radiant and beautiful, her hair was tied in a bun and she didn’t look tired or weak like earlier.

When she saw Sinbad, she hugged him.

And without pulling away, she stuffed something into his hand. Then she walked to the chair and sat down, with a wide smile on her face.

Sinbad was about to read the note she gave him, but before that she said to him, ‘Come, sit down, Sinbad.’

He did, confused. He wanted to read the note, but she took his hands and began playing with his fingers. ‘I missed you,’ she said.

‘Me too, Calypso.’ Sinbad smiled. ‘How has it been?’

‘It’s been great! I love it here. Everyone is so kind.’

‘But last time you said—’

‘They changed the tutor though. The new one is so good.

I get no time for myself.’ She showed her fingertips. ‘See, I don’t have to burn my fingers doing magic any more. It’s really great. Why didn’t you come earlier?’

‘I was ...’ stopped by the guild, ‘busy,’ he said with a hard expression.

She looked at him for a moment, a flicker of nostalgic sadness. ‘Keep coming, you know you are the only friend I have, right?’

Sinbad nodded. ‘Did they tell you when you’ll get out?’

‘Oh no. They said I’ll be going on a mission soon, so yay!’ She flashed a fake smile.

Sinbad knew she never gave those wide, sugar-coated smiles. He felt strange. He felt he was not talking to someone he once knew. ‘You look different.’

‘They make me dress up nicely and make me ... Well, they teach me how to speak properly as well.’

‘Yeah, you don’t sound...’

‘Like an animal? I know!’ She laughed. ‘Bismillah, I used to sound ridiculous.’

‘You really are happy here, right?’ Sinbad asked.

There was a brief pause. She looked around, her smile unwavering, and then said, ‘Of course I am, silly, though it would be great if you were around.’

‘I’ll try to come here more often. I’m just glad you are liking this place. I know it takes some time to grow on you, but you get used to it,’ he said. ‘I was initially intimidated by the training, but soon.

The door opened. Sinbad turned to see a guard who gave Safeena a nod to leave immediately.

‘Yeah, I know, listen, I have to leave,’ Safeena said, her eyes suddenly watery. ‘Visit me again? I have an astronomy class now. So long, Sinbad!’ She embraced him one last time and walked out of the room.

Sinbad couldn’t believe that he had been picturing this moment for the longest time, rewinding it in his mind, but it hadn’t panned out the way he thought it would.

He looked at the paper, unfurled it and read:

They are listening to this conversation.

I will act happy.

But Tm not.

Sinbad—

SAVE ME!

FIFTY

PRESENT DAY

The sun had set and all of them went back to the shore.

Sinbad, Husayn and Idris stood there, looking at the meek captain hugging the old, crazy man from the ship and rejoicing. They were busy chit-chatting. Sinbad and Idris exchanged a knowing, irritating glance with each other.

‘Can we do this fast?’ Sinbad asked. ‘You said you will tell us about the cat-eyed girl once we take you to your wreckage.’

The captain, who had long sideburns, smiled. He had been found wearing a long frock and a hat, sitting inside the cave where the giant would make him dance and sing for his entertainment.

‘I was wonderin’ whether Old Hiren would be alive or not.’ He grinned. ‘Thank ya so much, first of all, for rescuin’ me from the mad ol’ giant.’

Sinbad nodded modestly. ‘It’s all right.’

‘We have also signalled the nearest outpost about you two. They’ll be coming soon to pick you up,’ Idris added.

The crazy man and the captain hugged again.

Sinbad coughed and cleared his throat to draw attention to the matter at hand.

‘Oh ya,’ the captain said, ‘the cat-eyed girl. Strange gal. Smelled very...’

‘Sulphury?’ Husayn suggested.

‘Sorta, ya, like silver. Probably because of the trumpet she carried. Gods, it smelled horrible, that instrument,’ the captain said, gagging. ‘She was the only mortal I saw after such a long time and I was so pleased. Though she was very brisk and wanted to ask me about my work.’

‘Work?’ Idris asked. ‘Your trading?’

‘Well, tradin’ is a fancy word. I’m a smuggler.’ He grinned, flaunting a broken incisor tooth. ‘Got this when I got in a fist fight with some soldiers. Anyway, what I’m sayin’ is she asked me about my smugglin’ operations in the east.’

Sinbad recalled about how Zarqa had said that they should go to the east. That’s where they will find her, but the east was huge.

‘Anyhow, I had taken some important stuff out from the ports of Basra to our rivals like the Constantines and the Chinese. So she was particularly interested in knowing about this one Chinese man.’ He paused. ‘His name is Tian Shengong. And I have done quite a lot of business with General Tian.’

Sinbad had heard of the man. He was infamous all over Basra. There was gossip of how he had massacred more than a hundred thousand Arab emissaries who were stationed in China. Apparently, he belonged to the rebel alliance against the ruling Chinese empire. It was called the An Lushan Rebellion and Tian was an important naval commander part of that uprising.

‘A short, dangerous man, he is. Doesn’t speak much. He usually wants some papers, some salt, the usual stuff,’ the captain said. ‘We provided him whatever he wanted for a lot of dinars. So this cat-eyed girl, she was askin’ about him.’

‘Why?’ Sinbad asked.

‘She didn’t say. She didn’t care to tell me a reason.’

Sinbad asked, ‘Isn’t Tian against Arabs? Why did he work with you?’

‘Well, I’m famous in the circle ... as an affluent smuggler. He ignored my roots and embraced my passion for stealing cargo.’ The captain grinned.

Husayn cringed. ‘Do you know how we can find him?’

‘He has this castle ship. It’s a dream boat! It’s quite big and it has three floors, so it’s like a building, although not as tall as a building,’ the captain answered as if in awe. ‘He’s quite dangerous, so if you’re planning on meetin’ him, make sure you have a tradeoff to do with him. If he thinks you don’t have anything worthwhile, he might gut you just for being Arabs,’ the captain warned. ‘You’ll find him close to the Sindh River. It’s a two-day journey from here. Keep moving east. He keeps moving, so you might take more than two days. Can’t be sure.’

Idris nudged Sinbad, saying, ‘Ashrafiyah will help in tracking the ship quicker since Safeena’s smell would be going through the waterway.’

Sinbad nodded.

And they departed, with a new mission in sight.

The ship had begun to sail.

Sinbad and Husayn leant over the rails while Ashrafiyah stood at the front of the ship, looking through her spyglass.

‘I think we are getting closer,’ Husayn said.

‘I hope so,’ Sinbad said, furrowing his brow. ‘I wonder what work she had with Tian Shengong of all people. It doesn’t make sense.’

‘Can I be honest?’

‘Yeah.’

‘The man scares me more than a monster. I’ve heard tales about his torture techniques. He impales Arabs, Sinbad. Impales them!’ Husayn shivered. ‘When the caliph and the emperor of Tang dynasty joined hands, a group of people in China weren’t happy and they began hurting the Arab emissaries there. Bismillah, the amount of corpses that led to... It was horrible. In fact, many of the good, noble Chinese nurses came with the injured Arabs to Baghdad and Mosul and the rest of the Abbasid caliphate states and treated them.’

Sinbad didn’t say anything. He was just wondering what Safeena would want from such a spiteful man.

And before they could continue this conversation, a voice came: ‘Boys!’

They turned to see the squeaky little Chinese chef, who for a change looked all scrubbed and clean from all the mess she usually made on herself while cooking. ‘Dinner is ready. But first, what am I hearing about this meeting with Tian Shengong?’

‘Well, it’s where Safeena went last,’ Sinbad said.

‘Wode mayaV She slapped her palm against her forehead. ‘It’s like you can’t run away from something for long.’ She shook her head, her eyes horrified. ‘You must understand how evil this man is.’

‘I know,’ Sinbad said. ‘We know.’ He signalled to Husayn too, who nodded on cue.

‘No, you two idiot boys. The man is evil, the evillest man you’ll ever know. So evil that if you call the Devil, even the Devil would feel humiliated.’ She sighed. ‘He’s ... well... he’s just ruthless and horrible. Ah ya!’ she cursed herself, sitting down on the ground and crossing her arms.

‘Are you okay?’ Husayn asked.

‘I’m not. I don’t know what to do now, ya.’

‘What are you saying?’ Sinbad asked, looking confused.

‘You don’t get it. Both of you,’ Pressa said, pointing her finger at them. ‘I am returning to the place where I ran away from.’

Sinbad and Husayn looked at each other.

‘Tian Shengong,’ she said, ‘is my father.’

FIFTY-ONE

THREE YEARS AGO

Save me.

The words rung out in his head. He stared ahead at a wall in his empty room, waiting. Eventually, two smoky eyes popped out.

It was Azrael.

Sinbad looked at the fallen angel. ‘Tell me. How do you enter the well-guarded walls of the guild?’

‘Well, kid, it’s like this—I can’t let my body inside, but I can let my spirit travel. Also, I have an angel’s blood, so, well... it’s easier to go inside forbidden places since I’m supposed to be inherently good.’ Azrael chuckled. ‘You summoned me. And I’m sure it was not to know the technicalities of how I operate between well-guarded walls. So, if I am correct, I believe you have learnt Safeena’s truth.’ The fallen angel looked at the pentacle Sinbad had made in his room with Azrael’s name written on it in Hebrew.

Sinbad clutched the note Safeena had given him. ‘I want to know something before I ask you for help.’

‘Indeed, please ask,’ he prodded.

‘Why are you doing this? Fallen angels aren’t necessarily bad; they don’t support the Armageddon. They try to do good deeds on Earth so they can get their wings back from their superiors and are taken up back to the

skies,’ Sinbad said, remembering what he had learnt about the angels. ‘You, on the other hand, don’t care about doing good deeds.’

The eyes narrowed. ‘Ah, you want to know me. Might I ask why?’

‘Well, to trust you when we work together.’

‘Ermm.’ The eyes blinked, not being malicious any more. ‘I do need you. I wouldn’t lie. You are in the guild and you have shown yourself to be quite useful till now. Tell you what, I’ll let you peek a little into my life. You want to come forward, perhaps? And touch the darkness that surrounds me.’

Sinbad hesitated. ‘You’ll hurt me.’

‘I’m an angel. I can’t hurt you physically or in any way. I can just hire people to hurt you, and do you see any paid mercenaries around you right now?’ Azrael asked.

Sinbad thought for a moment. And then he came forward, pursing his lips and pressing on the darkness.

And instantly, his visions changed. He was no more in his dim room. Instead, he found himself in a big garden filled with apple trees. There were tall palatial towers made of glistening white marbles in the garden. Several Mala’ika flew over him with their white, almost blindingly shiny wings and silver armour on their bodies.

‘This is what we call Paradise,’ Azrael said. ‘This is where most Mala’ika or angels are born and manufactured into being soldiers. Look at those white feathers. That’s a trademark.’ He was standing in a corner, bare chested, and Sinbad saw large scars on his back, as if someone had plunged blades deep into it.

Azrael snapped his fingers for the vision to change and Sinbad entered a different reality where he found himself in a long corridor.

In front of him, he saw a familiar face—a man with long black wings, black hair and a cheeky smile.

It was Azrael. He looked relatively younger.

‘That’s me,’ the present Azrael said, his voice soft.

‘I was the only one born with black-coloured wings. They shunned me. So much so, I was considered what one might say a degenerate in the race of Mala’ika.’

The younger Azrael was waiting in the corridor when three men arrived. They were almost eight feet tall and had golden armour on them, with colossal white wings.

‘And these were the Big Three—Jibrael, Mikha’el and Israfil, the archangels. You know, the same Israfil who helped Al-Nuhrad,’ Azrael said.

The three looked at the younger Azrael and pushed him against the wall. They smacked him in the head before calling him a ‘degenerate’ and laughed at him. Young Azrael cried in the corner, while the three walked off.

‘I used to be constantly bullied by them, for they were quite popular and strong. They were ... perfect, you see. But me? Not so much.’ Azrael’s voice had grown deeper and it didn’t sound snarky at all.

Sinbad could sense the sincerity in the fallen angel’s words.

The scene changed again, as Azrael snapped his fingers, to night-time in the same garden.

‘I was told by Mikha’el to come here since I was doing a good job as an Angel of Death. Though it was a misrepresentation of the title since I was just helping the souls of the dead to go to Paradise and live there. But instead, they called me the ferryman of the dead or like a driver of a carriage.’ Azrael’s words reflected his hurt. ‘But this moment... this was the

time Mikha’el said that I was ready to be part of the Big Three and with me, it would become the Big Four.’ He paused. ‘I thought they had changed because I had confided in our elder, Metatron about how they were bullying me, calling me names, hitting me. And after that, they did stop until this day came.’

Young Azrael was waiting excitedly. Mikha’el entered along with Jibrael and Israfil.

‘They told me ..the older Azrael said, ‘that they wanted to talk to me.’

Sinbad saw the scene unfolding:

Young Azrael looked up at Mikha’el who stood the firmest. His skin was bright as light and he said, ‘Hello, great Azrael, I have brought the others. They have agreed that you need to be part of us now. It’s time.’

Israfil and Jibrael nodded.

‘Thank you.’ Azrael smiled to himself shyly. ‘What can

I do to become an archangel?’

‘Well, first, you can strip off your clothes,’Jibrael said.

‘What?’ Azrael got confused.

‘Come on, Azrael, be a little fun. This is the way, the ritual, to get into the Big Three,’ Mikha’el added. ‘Come on.’

Azrael was confused, but he pulled off his black cloak and stood there naked.

‘Wonderful,’ Mikha’el said as he pulled out a rope.

Azrael then realized what was happening and before he could react, Jibrael and Israfil held on to him and pushed him against the tree while Mikha’el wrapped the rope around him. His black wings were turned around the trunk and bent as Azrael screamed in agony.

‘Now, now, in the morning, Paradise will see what happens to those who rat on us,’ Mikha’el said. ‘You thought you could be one of us? Look at us, you pitiful, little dark-hooded demon.’ The archangel spat on Azrael. ‘What do you think of yourself, you degenerate? You are born in the wrong world, idiot. You are scum and you’ll remain scum for the rest of your life.’

Israfil and Jibrael laughed as Mikha’el stepped back and joined them. Their laughter echoed in the air even after they left Azrael.

Sinbad’s heart nearly lurched out of his chest, watching all this. The older Azrael looked at the younger self, his eyes crinkling with rage and softness for himself.

The younger fallen angel kept crying and whimpering, trying to get out of the ropes, all alone in the garden, but he was unable to.

And then Sinbad came back to his room as his vision changed and he pulled himself from the touch of the darkness, looking at

Azrael, whose eyes remained smoky as always.

‘You were a victim of bullying. They wronged you,’ Sinbad said quietly.

‘By the ones I looked up to,’ Azrael said, his voice soft. ‘After that day, my wings were broken and I was unable to fly. Metatron told me to repair them, but I chose to leave Paradise.’

‘Hold on. You were not thrown out?’

‘Not at all,’ Azrael sneered. ‘I broke my wings, tore them from my skin with my own bare hands and walked away, never looking back. I realized good and evil are subjective. For me, Mikha’el is someone I want payback from, while for you Mikha’el would be the fighter of injustice, the protector of innocents. Heh. Life is funny if you look at it from the other side. If you know the whole story.’

Sinbad sat back on his bed, unable to comprehend all this. He sympathized with Azrael. ‘Why didn’t you tell any of the higher angels what happened to you?’

‘And get strapped to the tree again, naked? Or something even worse. The Big Three are indestructible, but they have one weakness: they love order and peace. Talk about hypocrisy, eh? Anyway, look who’s troubling them now, kid.’ Azrael chuckled.

Sinbad wore a look of contemplation. He knew teaming up with Azrael was wrong, but he had no choice. He understood that Azrael was bullied and shamed and hence was sympathetic to Safeena, but he was using his past in a wrong way. He was committing bad deeds for revenge. And that path only led to a worse fate as there was no end to this; it was a long, dark road. Sinbad studied the eyes of the fallen angel and made up his mind. Though looking at his past had made it difficult, a choice had to be made: once Azrael helped him free Safeena, he would trick the angel. The ‘how’ was not what Sinbad thought of then, but he knew he would have to make a plan once the ball started rolling.

‘How do we free Safeena?’ Sinbad went straight to the point.

‘Well, it’s simple,’ the smoky-eyed fallen angel said. ‘We need the physicker who treats her—Ibn-Al-Amir. And I know exactly how to get him.’

FIFTY-TWO

PRESENT DAY

As they crossed the Sindh River, Ashrafiyah had tried to track Safeena's smell but hadn't been successful. The only ships that passed by were merchant vessels.

Husayn still practised with Markus and this time the African commander didn't call him weak. He felt it would be wrong to do so, considering how bravely he'd fought a were-hyena.

Sinbad was finally getting some rest, lying on his bed and contemplating Pressa's situation. Everyone on the ship now knew that Pressa was the daughter of the warlord Tian Shengong. And they thought she could be a good bait to talk to Tian and negotiate terms with him.

Pressa remained perplexed about this turn of events and kept to herself, staying in her room. No one spoke to her and Idris believed it was important to give her some time.

Sinbad went to the deck to meet Ashrafiyah. The second day had already begun and they were still unsuccessful. Everyone was getting restless as there was hardly any time left.

‘Can you smell it?’ Sinbad nudged. ‘The sulphur.’

‘She was close,’ Ashrafiyah said. ‘I think we are going to reach by tomorrow morning.’

Sinbad said, ‘Hmm. Thanks for doing this.’

‘Well, lover, you paid me well. I mean, you will pay once we return home safely?’ Ashrafiyah asked.

‘You are such a bad actor.’ Sinbad chuckled.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You keep saying you are doing this for the money, but you are not. You are a sincere person, Ash. I know it. You know it. Idris is thinking that you are throwing us off the trail because Azrael must have approached you,’ Sinbad said. ‘I don’t believe that. I believe you are genuinely working to get Safeena back.’

Ashrafiyah sighed. ‘So that’s what Idris thinks? That I got bought?’

‘Yeah. It’s not her fault. You put that image out there,’ Sinbad replied. ‘The world will believe in whatever you show them. So, always make sure your image reflects the person you actually are.’

‘I don’t want to,’ Ashrafiyah said, shrugging. ‘I think I’m better off like this, lover. The only reason I do this is to save myself from the pain I’ll be in if you die.’

Sinbad clasped her hand and she blushed. ‘I know you accepted this for me. Didn’t you?’

She didn’t say anything, removing her hand from his. ‘Just saying, I do care a bit that the world remains the way it is. But yes, if it is something that also makes you happy, then so be it.’

‘You’re cute.’ Sinbad pinched her cheeks.

Ashrafiyah grunted. ‘Let’s not get carried away, okay?’

‘What if you don’t get the coin?’

‘What do you mean?’ Ashrafiyah asked.

‘There could be a possibility that I might not work with the caliphate after this and then perhaps, things wouldn’t go as planned,’ Sinbad said. ‘But if that happens, will it be okay if your payment is a bit delayed?’

Ashrafiyah gritted her teeth. ‘No, it won’t, Sinbad. I’m not here for free.’

‘I know. I will reimburse you. I promise.’

‘Well, I trust you on that, but just make sure you don’t do anything stupid,’ Ashrafiyah said. ‘Like... like last time, okay? For her. She’s not a good influence on you.’

Sinbad sighed.

‘And you might think this crew is your home, this ship is the most important part of your life—it’s not. Neither am I. We are all working for one cause and we will all separate when this cause is fulfilled. I’m not your crew member, Sinbad. I might be your friend, but we are not sailing buddies.’ Ashrafiyah was brutally blunt. ‘And I will leave once this is done and you will owe me a lot of dinars if you don’t give me the money right then.’

Sinbad nodded glumly. He didn’t want to say anything to her, so he walked off when Idris called him to the wheel of the ship.

‘Well? Do you think she was bought?’ Idris asked.

‘No, she wasn’t. It’s stupid to even think like that,’ Sinbad said, shaking his head. ‘How’s Pressa?’

‘Incommunicado. Mind talking to her?’

‘Will do, captain.’ Sinbad smiled.

Sinbad stood at the lower deck outside Pressa’s door. He couldn’t stop thinking about what Ashrafiyah had said. He was getting close to the crew, the ship, but she was right. They’ll all leave once this is over.

He knocked on the door, but Pressa didn’t open.

He knocked again. ‘Pressa? Come on. It’s me.’

No response.

‘I know this is hard.’

‘You have no idea how hard this is!’ exclaimed Pressa. ‘No idea!’ ‘Well, at least you are talking.’

Silence.

‘I’m sorry, but you are our only hope, our only channel of communication with Tian.’

‘I ain’t talking to that monster, Sinbad!’ she exclaimed again.

Sinbad sighed. ‘We have only a few days, Pressa, before the world ends. Didn’t you say you wanted to save it? You never told me for whom? At least, tell me that.’

There was no response.

Sinbad scratched his cheeks and decided to leave, when a response from the other side came: ‘For my brother and my mother. We escaped my

father’s tyranny to save an Arab emissary. My mother was a nurse and she took care of the man. Father got to know and he was furious. Sent ships after us. But we were saved. We went to Basra. The emissary gave my mother and brother a place in Baghdad, but I stayed in Basra to make my own living and send money from there. I had to start working to create my fortune. We defied my father. And now if he sees me, he won’t be happy.’

‘I’m sure he will,’ Sinbad said. ‘And I promise I’ll save you.’

‘You can’t, not from him.’

‘You underestimate me.’ Sinbad smiled to himself.

When she didn’t reply, he added, ‘Do it for your mother. For your brother. Tian knows something about Safeena and that could help us locate her.’

Waiting for her answer, Sinbad sat down next to the door. He felt anxious, for he knew none of the people here were his friends except Husayn. Husayn was there for him.

With all these thoughts flowing through his mind, he closed his eyes.

When he woke up, the ship wasn’t moving. It had slowed to a stop.

And he looked up to find Pressa towering over him. ‘Well, boy? My father’s ship lies next to us. Shall we greet him?’

‘We found him?’ Sinbad asked, absolutely dazed.

She didn’t look particularly happy about it. ‘Yes, we did. And we don’t have much time left. Let’s go.’

‘Why did you agree to help?’

‘I’m done serving food to this crew. I might serve them now in a better way. After all, we are family.’ She winked.

Sinbad stood to his feet and went to the upper deck where all the crew members stood. And adjacent to them was the big castle ship.

The captain on the island did give an accurate depiction of it. It was made of hardwood and had multiple levels of decks.

And in the front near the masts stood the Chinese men and women, all armoured.

In the middle of it, he saw a small, bald man, his hands behind his back. And he had one glass eye.

‘That’s my father,’ Pressa said.

Sinbad walked with Pressa towards Idris, who stood at the front of their crew. ‘How did we find him?’

‘We didn’t. He did. We sent a message that we come in peace and we just want to talk,’ Idris replied.

‘Did he respond?’

‘No. Markus is downstairs preparing the catapults. If he doesn’t respond, we attack, okay?’ Idris said in a normal voice, trying to smile so that nothing looked off. Sinbad looked around for any other ship of Tian, but there was none. Perhaps kept for emergencies.

Pressa stepped forward and stood next to the handrails, so she could be clearly seen.

And at that moment, Sinbad swore Tian Shengong’s impassive face softened.

FIFTY-THREE

THREE YEARS AGO

Sinbad waited for Azrael in an alleyway.

It was night-time, and Sinbad had sneaked out of the fort from the burrow he had dug for himself. He was standing in the middle of an empty street bathed in the silver light of the glistening moon. He had his scimitar sheathed, as his heart pounded, wondering what Azrael was going to unravel for him.

They had to capture Ibn-Al-Amir, the physicker who tended to Safeena. But nothing was told to Sinbad until...

He saw some people approaching. He didn't know who they were until from the shadows appeared Azrael. Behind him were the paid mercenaries, but fresh faces, not the ones he saw in the bazaar. One of them carried a man who Sinbad thought seemed familiar.. . Ibn-Al-Amir.

Amir looked beaten up. He had bruises all over his face, his skin was pale and his shirt was drenched with blood.

The mercenary threw Amir to the ground, at Sinbad's feet.

'I present you my gift for the Chosen Day. Apologies for the delay.' Azrael cheekily grinned.

'You already did the job.' Sinbad knelt down to see Amir's brutally injured face. 'What did you do to him?'

‘Tortured him for hurting Safeena.’ Azrael grimaced. ‘He deserved worse though.’

Amir looked up at Sinbad and grunted. ‘It’s you... You’re siding with the monster. Every—everyone should know.’ He tried to get up, but Azrael pressed his foot against the man’s shoulder. ‘Now you can ask him whatever you want to.’

‘He will tell on us,’ Sinbad said. ‘You shouldn’t have showed him my face.’

‘Oh please, come on,’ Azrael said, ‘you are going to help her escape. People should know who you are. In fact, I have plans for this physicker. Some grand plans. So go ahead and ask him.’

Sinbad was scared, but he quickly said, ‘How is Safeena?’

‘You wouldn’t... know... I wouldn’t...’

Azrael pressed his boot deeper into the physicker’s shoulder and he yowled in agony. ‘Tell the boy what you told me. He should know what you plan to do to her.’

‘You...’ Amir coughed up blood.

‘Ugh.’ Azrael frowned and snapped his fingers.

A mercenary came forward and with a quick movement, he swung the axe down into the physicker’s head. The blood sprayed over Sinbad, who flung himself back, feeling horrified. And a little went across Azrael’s face.

‘Dear, dear,’ the fallen angel said, wiping the crimson drops, ‘he was being useless.’

‘I... I thought you had plans for him. What have you done?’ Sinbad said, still in shock.

‘Yeah,’ he said matter-of-factly, ‘the plan was to kill him.’

Sinbad wiped the blood off his face, his hands shivering, and Azrael walked up to him. ‘Don’t worry, he was a bad man. He deserved to die.’

‘I don’t even know whether to trust you or not,’ Sinbad said. ‘You frighten me. You are unpredictable.’

‘Not with you,’ he said. ‘Don’t you want to know what he told me before I dragged him here to tell you the same thing, otherwise you wouldn’t have believed me?’

Sinbad tried to collect himself. He had just witnessed a bloody decapitation. ‘I... I...’

The fallen angel knelt down to his level and said, ‘Apparently, the training isn’t going well for Safeena. The physicker said that she’s too powerful and doesn’t know how to control her powers, even though she has more than twenty tutors trying to control her.’

Sinbad waited as Azrael took a slight pause. There was sincerity in his eyes. He continued, ‘They believe that the best course of action is ... to kill her.’

FIFTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY

A feast was prepared.

Sinbad had no clue how this happened, but he ended up being in the dinner hall of Tian Shengong's ship, surrounded by pork, chicken, ham, all sorts of berries and many other lavish treats. He was sitting between Pressa and Husayn and opposite Idris, who kept eyeing him. Tian had his men stationed around the room with their blades as a security measure, even though it looked more like a threat.

After he saw Pressa was on board, Tian asked for truce. When both sides had agreed, he had hugged Pressa who acted like the perfect daughter.

'I apologize for what happened earlier,' Tian said. 'We knew you were following us, but if we knew you were delivering my daughter back, I wouldn't have been so threatening in the first place.' He chuckled to himself, taking a sip from the goblet of wine in his hand.

Pressa shared a nervous glance with Sinbad as if saying: He's being awfully sweet. Something is up.

'My daughter and my wife with my newborn son had run away to save your race,' Tian began. 'I was angry at first, but then I realized I had been suffocating them too much. It was horrible. I apologize.' He turned to Pressa and gave her a sad smile. 'Will you forgive me?'

Pressa didn't respond.

‘Take your time,’ Tian said. ‘Also, I hope I see Yin. It’s been a while since I’ve seen my wife.’ He sipped again. ‘How did you find me, Peizhi?’

‘I came on board with them,’ Pressa said. ‘They are trying to find their lost friend.’

‘How sad!’ Tian exclaimed, looking sympathetically at Sinbad and Idris.

He doesn’t seem like a bad man.

Pressa added, ‘Have you seen her? She has cat eyes.’

His expression changed. Tian clenched his jaw. ‘The cat-eyed girl, of course. She caused havoc. Broke my prisoner’s cage, took her out and destroyed half of my fleets with her vessel,’ he said angrily.

‘Prisoner?’ Sinbad said between coughs.

‘Yes. A very important prisoner,’ Tian said sternly and looked down. ‘Oh, so hold on, Peizhi... you haven’t come for me. You came for the girl?’ He looked at Sinbad and everyone else around the table. ‘So, you aren’t here to drop her off?’ A deafening silence followed.

Pressa froze. ‘Uh no, that’s not true.’

‘Even if it is, it’s fine.’ Tian chuckled. ‘All’s well that ends well. Though it makes me wonder what you are doing with two Seids.’ He pointed at Sinbad’s runed tunic as well as Idris’s. ‘This friend is someone important and strong. I wonder if she’s even a friend.’ He looked at Sinbad, his voice growing hoarser. ‘Makes me intrigued.’

Sinbad grabbed his fork, which was kept to a side, ready to attack Tian if he did anything. He seemed to be getting more and more intimidating by the second.

‘It’s good though.’ Tian smiled. ‘But first...’ he said, glaring at Sinbad and Idris, ‘get me the prisoner back. And I know that only a Seid can trap it. She lives in these waters, but she hides from me.’

Befuddled, Husayn asked, ‘Lives in these waters? Umm... what will we get in return?’

That was the wrong question to ask since the guards surrounding them sprung forward, bringing their blades close to each individuals’ head on the table except for Tian, who was happily eating his pork. ‘Peizhi stays with me, of course. Even if you all didn’t intend to bring her to me, she’s here and she’s my daughter.’ He looked at a guard who then quickly grabbed Pressa and dragged her away, while she screamed and screamed. Sinbad clutched the fork tightly just when Tian spoke again, ‘And one of you needs to go out and get me my prisoner from that girl. Only one of you. The rest are with me till the work is finished.’

There were so many things Sinbad wanted to say, but Idris spoke up, ‘What type of prisoner is this?’

‘A goddess,’ said Tian. ‘Her name is Ekajati. I was supposed to use her for diplomatic missions before that meddlesome cat-eyed girl freed her and caused me problems. I don’t know why she freed her. Apparently, she wanted something from her.’

‘Fine, we will get her,’ Idris said.

‘Oh no, not we. Only you.’ He pointed at Sinbad. ‘I don’t trust women.’ He sneered at Idris. ‘They backstab you when you need them the most. And this young boy,’ he said, looking at Husayn, ‘would be the perfect leverage since he looks absolutely harmless and seems to have good chemistry with him,’ he said, flashing a smile in Sinbad’s direction. ‘So, my boy, will you get started and get me that goddess?’

Sinbad weighed his options. He wanted to protect Idris and Husayn, but at the same time learn about Safeena and rescue Pressa—also, there was a blade placed against his neck.

There was too much at stake right now. He knew he had to find a way to save everyone and get Safeena.

And he didn’t have a lot of time.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘I will.’

FIFTY-FIVE

THREE YEARS AGO

Sinbad knew he couldn’t take Azrael’s help any more.

Not after what happened in the alleyway. Azrael was a murderer. The image of the severed head haunted him all night until Sinbad decided to take action the next morning and approached the one person he knew he could trust in the guild— Master Reis.

Sinbad knew his master was behind Safeena’s estrangement from him, but he also knew that Reis would stop at nothing to save Safeena.

He stood outside his master’s study, and with a careful knock on the door, he waited for him to open.

Master Reis stepped out in white pyjamas and a loose black tunic. It was early morning, and it seemed as if he’d slept in his study itself. He rubbed his eyes and asked, ‘What happened, boy?’

‘There is something I must talk to you about.’

‘Sure.’

He let his apprentice in as Sinbad twisted his fingers nervously. The door closed behind him and he said, ‘I hope

I didn’t disturb you, master.’

‘Not at all. In fact, I want to show you something.’ Master Reis gave him a half-smile as he walked to his table and held a small multicoloured box in his hand. ‘You know what this is? I call it the Pandora’s box. Had been working on it for a few days. You know how we meet mages on our journey that are protected by stones and spells? Well, this box will help us in dispelling all sorts of magic protections on them once it is opened because I have used some anti-spell formulas in it that demagnetize sorcery. I thought of creating this after we had that fight with Leona... or Leonard.’ He groaned. ‘Here, you keep it. We will use it on one of our journeys.’

Sinbad did so. And for a moment, he was lost in the beauty of the mosaic box.

‘Tell me now,’ Reis said as he walked to a wall and leant on it, his arms crossed. ‘What is the urgency?’

Sinbad collected himself, thinking about what he had actually come to Reis for and said, ‘You can’t ask me how I know this, but—’

Reis narrowed his eyes. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You can’t ask me how I know about what I’m going to tell you.’ Reis remained mum and nodded after a pause. ‘Fine, what is it?’ ‘Safeena is going to be killed by the people in the Raqqa-Rafiqa fort. We need to save her. The grand master perhaps lost hope and gave up on her or something. She’s turning out to be too dangerous,’ Sinbad said in one breath. ‘We can’t let that happen, master. We brought her here and we can’t let her die. There must be an alternative.’

Reis straightened himself up in shock. ‘Are you sure this source is credible?’

‘Very much so.’ Sinbad nodded. ‘What should we do?’

‘Pack your bags,’ he said. ‘We are leaving for Raqqa-Rafiqa.’ Sinbad smiled.

I knew he would help me.

FIFTY-SIX

PRESENT DAY

‘You sure you want to do this?’ Ashrafiyah asked.

They stood in the cargo hold of their ship. A lot of cargo was kept here, but there was enough space for them to execute their next plan.

‘I am sure,’ Sinbad replied. ‘Summon the goddess.’

He was standing inside the salt circle. Gods and goddesses are scary folks. They can devour people they don’t like. So it’s the salt that does the magic here by protecting the person standing inside the circle.

‘The source of her presence is in these waters. She can easily be summoned,’ Sinbad added.

‘What’s her name?’

‘Ekajati.’

She grimaced. ‘She’s a fierce goddess of Tibetan mythology. She won’t be happy.’

Sinbad didn’t reply. He waited in the circle. Ashrafiyah began the ritual by chanting loudly and throwing some spices in the air. Suddenly, her fingers sparked noisily as a strong energy surrounded her. Her eyes grew large and full of power, as she loudly said: ‘Ekajati!’ And then...

Nothing happened.

Ashrafiyah, who was herself confused, said, ‘Wait for a while. She’ll turn up.’

‘Okay,’ Sinbad said, looking around awkwardly. Then he said, ‘I have to say this because I have been feeling this for a while. You are wrong.’

‘What?’

‘About us not being family,’ he said. ‘You might not be. I can see how you always distance yourself from us, not being part of our missions. You don’t want to be with us and I get it. But we are family, with or without you. Pressa believes it. I’m sure the others do too.’ He glared at Ashrafiyah who just grunted quietly. ‘I know you help me because you like me and you are getting money too, but... fight for a bigger purpose, like actually putting a positive mark on the world.’

‘Oh, as if you do,’ Ashrafiyah said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Idris told me how you let the vampires die. They were innocent and you came for me and Cain.’

‘I saved you two!’

‘You always wanted to be a hero, Sinbad,’ Ashrafiyah said. ‘You don’t look like anything you used to be. You have become like that master of yours; what was his name? Reis. Only thought about achieving the end goal, by hook or by crook.’

‘And you have commitment issues.’

‘Of course I do!’

Sinbad shook his head. ‘And you make yourself believe it’s because of your commitment issues with your stepfather. You feel that just like him, people will leave you. That they can’t be trusted. They can’t be ...’

She started to get teary eyed. ‘You, of all people, shouldn’t be saying this, Sinbad. You left me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Back when we were talking... writing. I wanted..Tears began to trickle down her cheeks. ‘I wanted to keep talking to you, but you just stopped sending me letters. And then later you tell me you met this girl.’

Sinbad was confused. ‘Do you like me?’

‘No, you self-indulgent fool. I’m into girls.’ Ashrafiyah sniffed the tears back. ‘I meant about our friendship. We had been going so well and it just... suddenly went downhill. So don’t preach what you can’t practise.’

‘Oh, wait, I didn’t know that,’ Sinbad said, lowering his gaze, feeling guilty. ‘I’m sorry. I think we both have hurt each other tremendously. Unintentionally.’

‘Well...’ Ashrafiyah shrugged.

Just then, a cloud of vapour appeared in front of them and their attention went to the legless green spirit floating in the air. She had green eyes, green hair and a greenish aura around her. She looked at Sinbad and Ashrafiyah and moved forward to bury her fangs into them, but the salt protection circle deflected her.

‘Hello, Ekajati,’ Sinbad said, putting behind his heated conversation with his friend Ashrafiyah. ‘I’m Sinbad and this is Ashrafiyah, a Strigoi Viu.’

The spirit growled. ‘What is it you want, mortal? How dare you summon me?’

‘Well, we know you got trapped by the Chinese guy.’

‘Ugh,’ the spirit groaned, ‘that loathsome horror show. Do you work for him?’

‘Oh, absolutely not.’ Sinbad chuckled. Tn fact, we are against him.’

‘Good. Kill him for me!’

‘Why can’t you do it yourself?’ Ashrafiyah asked. ‘You have been roaming the seas for a while now.’

‘Because he and his men have talismans that protect them. I can’t do it. I am stuck.’ She growled. ‘I find ways for it, but it just never happens. Do it for me and I will tell you what you want to know. I’ll even help you go there.’

Sinbad arched his brows. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘We goddesses know the ins and outs of human motivation. I know what drives both of you,’ Ekajati said, her eyes filled with green smoke. ‘Get me Tian Shengong’s head and I will give you information about Safeena Umair. You don’t have a lot of time. It’s midnight, so only two days to go.’

‘And as expected, you don’t care about the world being blown up?’ Sinbad asked.

‘I wouldn’t be affected, and humans have become crueller, so I wouldn’t mind them dying.’

And with that, she vanished into thin air.

Sinbad was silent for a while till Ashrafiyah said, ‘So this was your plan? To just summon her?’

‘Not really. I thought we would get some information out of her or trap her,’ Sinbad said. ‘But I stopped. She’s not our enemy. Tian is. We need to figure out a way to do it. And

I think what she told me is useful. I have a plan.’

Ashrafiyah shook her head. ‘Not we. Only you, Sinbad. I’m leaving.’

‘Why?’

She moved from her circle and started walking up the stairs. Sinbad followed her. ‘I need you for this, Ash.’

‘I don’t care, Sinbad. It’s done,’ Ashrafiyah said, clenching her fists. ‘I’m leaving for good. I don’t belong here. I never did. I don’t want the money. You don’t owe me anything. And

I have done my job. I have brought you till Ekajati who will take you to Safeena. We just... There’s too much history between us. And you are right. The commitment issue, it comes from my father and I don’t like it. I run away from these arguments, I drink my pain away. I have not cared about a soul until now. Until you came ... You were supposed to be my friend. But what’s done is done. So yes, I am running away from this too.’

And she transformed into energy, teleporting in front of his eyes.

He was left alone.

He had to improvise.

He had to believe in luck. He had no choice but to go with this plan.

This is the only way.

Though he now did agree with Idris.

Ashrafiyah couldn’t be trusted.

But she didn’t betray them.

She betrayed me.

FIFTY-SEVEN

THREE YEARS AGO

Sinbad was packing his clothes in his rucksack. He picked up the multicoloured box and he could see that it could be used in multiple situations. Especially to enter the fort where Safeena was trapped. He smiled a little. I will save you.

He picked up his bags and walked to the door to open it...

But he couldn’t pull it open.

He tried several times before realizing that it was locked. He beat on it and hit it over and over, but it didn’t work. It was locked.

‘Hey! Open the door! If someone is playing a prank...’

‘Shut your trap, boy!’ a voice came out, while another came as well:

‘We had night duty yesterday and we’re trying to get some sleep. And you ain’t helping.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Guards,’ the two of them said in unison. ‘And we have been told to keep you inside.’

‘What? I demand that I be freed. There’s been a misunderstanding,’ Sinbad cried out as he banged his fists against the door. ‘Who told you to keep me here? Whose orders?’

And then he heard the name from one of the guards:

‘Master Reis.’

FIFTY-EIGHT

PRESENT DAY

He would be lying if he said he wasn't frightened.

They had to summon Ekajati without Ashrafiyah's help, but Sinbad still went ahead with the plan he had thought of initially— this time making Markus perform the ritual and say the chants, which took a lot of persuading.

All the crew members stood behind them, disgruntled since the skies weren't favouring them. A broad plank bridged their ship with Tian's, which stood on the opposite side. He had Husayn and Idris with him, their arms tied up with ropes. The trade-off was happening under the open skies in the middle of a storm. It was raining heavily and the storms also brought strong winds and frequent thunder. The disturbed waters didn't make the two ships quite so stable.

'So you got it?' Tian said from his ship.

'Yes,' Sinbad said. 'I have trapped it.'

'Show me.'

Sinbad showed the box in his hand. 'I've trapped it in here.'

Tian raised his brows. 'Smart. Give it to me.'

'No,' Sinbad screamed over the thunder and lightning. 'I'll give it to you once you hand over my friends.'

Tn the middle of the bridge then.’

Sinbad nodded.

Tian ordered his man to bring Husayn and Idris to the bridge while Sinbad walked by himself. As they reached the midpoint, the two stood beside Sinbad and he handed the box to Tian’s man who walked away immediately.

Tian looked at the box. ‘Good work.’

Sinbad sighed and hugged Husayn and Idris. One of his crew members broke their shackles and Sinbad turned his attention back to Tian. ‘What about Pressa?’

‘Pressa who?’

‘Peizhi.’

‘She isn’t coming, lad.’ Tian smiled. ‘She’s my property, my blood.’

‘She’s not your... Where have you kept her?’ Sinbad said through gritted teeth.

‘Down, somewhere, how does it matter? It was nice doing a trade-off with you.’ Tian gestured to his men to pull the bridge and move the ship forward.

Sinbad went back, stood on his deck and then suddenly said, ‘Open the box, at least. For evidence. Don’t worry, she won’t pounce on you, she’s quite condensed in there.’

The Chinese warlord narrowed his eyes, before opening it to see green smoke emanating from it. ‘Looks like her colour. Why?’

‘Nothing.’ Sinbad grinned, snapping his fingers twice to which Markus began to chant.

As he finished the chant, the bridge was being lifted, but nothing else happened. The goddess didn’t appear.

Shucks. Why is she late?

Come on... Come on...

Sinbad had given his master’s creation—the Pandora’s box—to Tian so it would dispel the talismans on the ship, leading the goddess to attack them. But Markus was unable to summon her at the right time. Probably because his pronunciation was wrong or perhaps because, well, he was not a mage. Sinbad nervously cursed under his breath. All this for nothing.

‘What are you trying to do, Sinbad?’ Idris asked.

‘Trying to save Pressa.’ Sinbad was losing hope as Tian’s ship began to sail forward.

‘We got saved, that’s a big deal in itself,’ Husayn said. ‘Otherwise he would have killed us.’

‘No,’ Sinbad said firmly. ‘I can’t let Pressa be with this monster.’

And at that moment, a wispy green smoke grew in the air all around them and the rain began to turn into blood.

Even Tian’s ship stopped moving.

Then from the water emerged several grotesque creatures who seemed mutilated and burnt and looked like... the undead.

They were all latching on to Tian’s ship, scampering up, towards him and his crew.

From the skies, a spirit appeared, the goddess in the flesh. She said to Tian and his crew, loud enough for Sinbad and his crew to hear as well: ‘You have tortured me enough. And now you shall be punished.’

She got summoned! She got summoned!

Sinbad laughed to himself.

But how? Markus couldn’t have...

‘Hey, lover,’ a voice came.

Sinbad turned to see Ashrafiyah breaking through the crowd with a cool smile dancing on her lips.

‘You came back?’

Idris, Husayn and Markus were all confused as to what was happening, but Sinbad knew in his heart that even though Ashrafiyah had a big tiff with him, she wouldn’t give up so easily on their friendship.

‘Yes, we have a lot of issues, but I think every family has them. I feel if a family doesn’t have issues, they aren’t a family.’ Ashrafiyah smiled at Sinbad. ‘Now let’s get Pressa before the zombies do.’

Idris and Husayn chuckled and readied themselves.

Sinbad pulled out his sword. He looked at Tian’s ship, which was riddled with the undead army attacking Tian, who was fighting alongside his men valiantly.

Idris yelled to her crew: ‘Attack! Catapults!’

The Chinese didn’t anticipate this double attack, but ball of fires were hurled from one ship to another, damaging the castle ship.

‘Let’s end this.’ Sinbad grinned.

Everything was hazy when they entered the battle scene.

While the zombies were taking care of half the Chinese soldiers, Sinbad and his crew had to fight the other half. Markus fought with his axe while Husayn wielded a sword and Idris's weapon of choice was a spear. Ashrafiyah let loose, somersaulting in the air, clawing at whoever came close and drinking their souls like water. She would be overfed by the end of this battle.

Sinbad had been fighting too many soldiers at once. Suddenly, one of them came in front of him, but he managed to dodge him, plunging his sword and swiftly pulling it out of him. Then another appeared, but he rolled across the floor, stood to his feet and smacked the hilt on his head.

'Pressa!' he called out.

He rushed towards the lower deck as more soldiers appeared. With a quick spell that he recalled, he used a wind-controlling power to push them apart on each side.

He sprinted forward, leaving the soldiers behind him dazed, hoping one of his men or the zombies would take care of them.

The structure underneath was also getting flooded as there were now holes in the ship. The Greek fire that they had blasted had massive range and had plunged into Tian's ship, cracking its foundation.

Sinbad saw a soldier approaching him. He quickly dodged his sword attack, kneed him hard in the stomach and with his right hand struck the man on his face, throwing him back.

Sinbad winced; his right hand was still wounded from the fight against Cain. He came forward yelling Pressa's name until he

heard:

'I'm here, ya! I'm here!'

Sinbad walked to the door from where the sound come and banged the hilt of his sword against the lock. It slammed open and he found Pressa inside, knee-deep in water, her face stained with tears. She ran and hugged him.

‘You okay?’

‘Yes, boy. I’m fine. Thank you for coming for me.’

‘Of course.’

They began to make a move when they heard a voice, deep and raspy, coming from the end of the slim corridor:

‘You cannot run away.’

Sinbad turned to see Tian looking at them angrily, his glass eye unblinking. He had a long sword in his hand. ‘You can’t run away. You can’t. I have been ruling these waters for so long. I can’t die at the hands of some teenager.’ And he came forward, surging through the water and floating debris, to fight Sinbad, who instantly deflected the sword and kicked him in the stomach.

‘Run,’ he told Pressa. ‘Find yourself—’

‘I will,’ she blurted. ‘Do me a favour.’

‘What?’

‘Kill the man,’ Pressa hissed, breathing hard in anger, and ran upstairs.

It was him and Tian now. Tian prepared himself, moving further to the side where Sinbad had deflected his attack.

And then the short man went berserk, hitting light jabs in quick succession and pushing Sinbad to the ground, who splashed into the water and gasped for air. As he went for a heavy attack while aiming his sword at Sinbad’s abdomen, the Seid rolled over and Tian’s blade hit the ground.

Tian growled and then chased Sinbad further to get hold of him, his hand reaching for his neck. Sinbad stood up, elbowed him and pressed him against the wall, bringing his sword down on Tian’s neck.

‘You’ve burnt men, impaled women and killed children like they were nothing. Men like you don’t deserve to live,’ Sinbad said.

Tian struggled but pushed Sinbad with all his force, throwing him towards the other wall. His sky-iron sword fell on the ground, disappearing beneath the seeping water.

Tian scowled and went with his sword to attack him when a green spirit rose from the rippling waves and hurled itself towards Tian, grabbing him by the neck.

Sinbad staggered back as he saw Ekajati strangulating the man, who kept trying to hit her with his sword, but nothing was happening to the goddess. His body slowly dissipated.

Ekajati had a peaceful look on her godly face.

Sinbad panted, standing with his back against the wall, amidst the chaos and the wails of the Chinese soldiers, as he realized that he had won.

They had brought their ship further ahead from the wreckage they had left behind.

Most of Sinbad’s crew members had scars and injuries, while a few died. But many survived. For that, Sinbad was grateful.

Sinbad was in the captain’s cabin with Husayn, Pressa, Idris, Markus and Ashrafiyah and in front of them sat the grateful Tibetan goddess,

Ekajati.

‘I thank you all.’ She had a content smile—no need for any salt circles then. ‘You supported me to end my menacer and for that, as promised, I will give you the information you seek. Safeena Umair freed me because she wanted a gateway into my world.’

‘That is?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Shangri-La.’

Sinbad raised his brows. He knew about the place. It was a paradise for good souls.

‘Shangri-La is divided into two. One belongs to the deceased while the other belongs to the dangers of the deceased—it’s a barren frozen wasteland with many temples in it,’ Ekajati said. ‘A long time ago, Al-Nuhrad had trapped the Beast and buried it there, never to reveal this information. The last person who knew this was the cat-eyed girl Safeena. I am not aware of how she got the information, but she rescued me and I helped her go into my world.’

‘For what?’ Sinbad asked.

‘To awaken the Beast. She has the trumpet with her, which she will blow, so the Beast would be woken from his burial ground and come forth into our world,’ Ekajati said.

Sinbad and Idris shared an anxious look.

Idris said, ‘Take us there.’

Ekajati nodded. ‘I will.’

And she vanished.

Midnight had struck and it was the day the trumpet would be blown. They didn’t have time. All of them were dumbstruck for a while, but they quickly got down to thinking about their next steps.

All of a sudden, the waters beneath them began to churn. He rushed to the upper deck. Everyone else followed and what they witnessed was nothing short of a marvel.

In front of them lay a huge cosmic portal—a mist-filled hole of green, purple and red orbs—which was as big as a ship and shimmered with magic.

The winds were blowing hard. The boatswain walked to Sinbad, holding on to his turban, and asked him, ‘Is this supposed to happen?’

‘Well. Yeah. Get on it.’

He nodded. The engine was engaged with full power and all sail set. Frightened, all the crew members braced themselves as the ship sailed through the portal.

And Sinbad saw light.

Before everything turned into darkness.

FIFTY-NINE

THREE YEARS AGO

Sinbad couldn’t believe he had been betrayed.

By his very own master.

He wanted to loathe himself for believing in him. He wanted to scream and shout and find a way to lessen the pain. Suddenly, he heard a voice:

‘Self-pitying much?’

In the dark corner of the room, two smoky eyes popped out.

‘Azrael, this is not the time to be snarky.’

‘Beg to differ, kid. This is exactly the time since you are wallowing in self-pity while your friend over there is going to be executed by your dear master and his men,’ Azrael said. ‘Get moving and leave.’

‘How? I’m in a cell. In the guild,’ Sinbad said.

‘Oooh and I thought you were smarter than what you did in Cain’s prison.’ Azrael chuckled. ‘I’m waiting with the horses outside. My men have already left for the fort in Raqqa-Rafiqa and they will get rid of the mages responsible for the protection spells.’ Sinbad nodded. ‘Why do you need me?’

‘Because it should be you who will tell Safeena to leave with us. Otherwise, she won’t.’

‘You are as evil as the guild,’ Sinbad retorted.

‘At least, we won’t kill the girl, kid.’

Sinbad contemplated.

‘How should I escape?’

‘Ah, well, you can always do the old choke act. See ya!’

Sinbad didn’t fully understand what he was talking about, but he quickly went to the door and knocked on it, yelling, ‘Help me! Help me! I need a medic! I need a doctor!’ He started coughing loudly and fell with a thud to the ground.

The guards opened the door. ‘You all right, kid?’

Sinbad coughed, his face growing red. ‘Help me ... Water.’

One of the guards came with ajar of water when Sinbad instantly kicked him between the legs. The guard fell to the side. Pulling out his scimitar, Sinbad sprung to his feet and pointed it at the other guard, whose hand was still at the hilt of the sheathed sword.

‘Go to that side,’ Sinbad ordered as he moved towards the door, keeping the sword pointed at the guard. He grabbed his bags and closed the door behind him.

He raced down the hall as he undid the bindings on his wrists with the blade, bumping into professors and tutors along the way. There were other apprentices, who were left gaping and astounded at what he was doing. A few soldiers spotted him and got alarmed.

Come on, come on.

He sprinted down the stairs, dashed through the corridor and reached the main gate, moving out of the protection of the guild and looking for Azrael.

That was when he saw a grey-bearded merchant, wearing a floral shirt, turning from a corner and coming towards him on horseback and bringing along another one.

It was Azrael’s new disguise. Sinbad mounted the mare.

‘Oh, you did it, didn’t you?’ Azrael grinned cheekily.

‘Yeah. We don’t have a lot of time. So we must leave now.’

‘Whatever you say, captain. Giddy-up!’ He directed his mare, moving forward while Sinbad followed.

And Sinbad looked back to take one last look at the guild—only to find a familiar face watching from one of the windows.

It was Master Reis.

SIXTY

PRESENT DAY

They entered Shangri-La.

And it was anything but a paradise.

It was a barren wasteland with cold winds blowing, freezing Sinbad's bones, so much so that he had to make a run for the stocked-up winter clothing from the ship's storage, like the rest of his crew. He put on a fur coat and looked around. Idris was in a long overcoat, Husayn wore a jumper and Pressa wrapped a thick cardigan around herself. Ashrafiyah didn't feel cold as she was cold-blooded, while Markus said he had a muscular frame that could withstand the weather and kept denying that he felt chilly even though Sinbad did see him shivering at times and his teeth chattering.

They were in the middle of a frozen river. And the ship was stuck to where it landed. Behind them, the portal was still open and perhaps would remain open till they found the trumpet and returned.

'We need to make our way on foot. We are losing time,' Sinbad announced as soon as he got off the ship. Idris ordered part of Markus's team to start breaking the ice so the ship could sail back to the portal, which was still yards away, otherwise they would be stuck in the frozen riverbed forever.

Pressa stayed on the ship. Sinbad, Husayn, Idris, Ashrafiyah and Markus with his dozen men entered the frozen lands and walked up the slopes after crossing the frozen river. Far off in the distance, they could see an enigmatic temple that stood up high, towering over them.

They walked through the snow-capped groves, entering into dangerous territory. At the entrance of the temple, they saw golden-haired and pointy-eared soldiers dressed in black cloaks.

Nephilim.

Sinbad turned to the soldiers behind him and grunted under his breath, ‘Listen, everyone ... stab them in the heart. Otherwise, they won’t die.’

Idris said, ‘You talk as if you are the captain.’

‘Well, I’m sorry if you want...’

‘No, please. You are good at it.’ She winked.

And then they moved towards the battlefield.

In the middle of the shrieks of armour against armour and swords clashing and clinking, Sinbad stole a glance at the large ornate temple behind him, which had the face of a fanged Beast made in the front. Standing on this hilltop, they were at such a great height that Sinbad could see other hills from here, and from what he could make out, there were several such temples dedicated to other dangerous entities that once came to Earth.

He wanted to explore them. But right now, the Nephilim with their long white spears demanded his attention. They kept attacking him while he kept parrying their attacks, moving from side to side.

His eyes were on the goal, which was to enter the temple—where Safeena would be.

He used his thokcha sword to deflect an oncoming attack, instantly taking a step back. Then lunging forward, he pushed the sword deep into the Nephilim's chest, plunging it completely through to the other side.

He looked around and saw Ashrafiyah fighting in combat, jumping on a Nephilim and digging her nails into its skin. Husayn wasn't being the most majestic, but he was holding his ground, guided by Markus who was helping him fight the onslaught. Markus was using his axe, swirling it around and slashing the halfangels into pieces.

Idris, meanwhile, was rotating her double-sided spear at tremendous speed and killing the Nephilim left, right, and centre. She was so quick on her feet that it was actually fun to see her, dancing her way through the battlefield.

That was when he felt a kick...

Right across his face.

Sinbad turned to face a Nephilim charging at him. He held his sword with his uninjured left hand, duelling with the Nephilim that was twisting and spinning his spear rapidly in the air. It then threw across the sword in a flash, which sliced through Sinbad's jacket and tunic. Sinbad felt a warm gush of blood flooding down his arm, but he resisted the pain and immediately leapt on the Nephilim, plunging the sword deep into its heart.

He rolled forward, stabbing another Nephilim, then pulled out his sword...

Going for another one!

It was done in quick succession with his gaze focused on the gate.

He moved quickly towards it, when a Nephilim appeared in front of him.

Sinbad smirked, saying, 'Come on, man, let me just enter.' 'Arghwargh,' the Nephilim replied in gibberish.

‘Okay, I understand you have a family to feed,’ Sinbad said. ‘And you need to be back home by evening, but don’t do this right now.’

The Nephilim was confused about whether Sinbad was joking or not.

Sinbad took advantage of this and skidded across the ground in between its legs, got up and tapped on the Nephilim’s shoulder. Confused, the half-angel turned around and Sinbad stuck his sword into its chest, twisting it deep inside in the heart and pulled it out.

Then he eyed the gate of the temple and dashed towards it.

He entered a large room overlaid with solid gold that led to a long corridor that was lit by several wall torches on either side. He moved ahead and in front of him was a big burial ground where a girl with her back to him was kneeling down and her arms were somehow attached to an orb. Behind the burial ground was a statue of the Beast. It was in the shape of a panther, but very weirdly mutated, having three heads.

Sinbad walked ahead slowly. He could see the girl was meditating, her eyes closed. She had the trumpet with her on the side. Then she picked up the trumpet and was about to blow...

‘No!’ Sinbad screamed. ‘Calypso!’

His voice echoed through the temple.

The girl turned and the energies around her dropped.

Her cat eyes widened in shock.

‘Sinbad?’

SIXTY-ONE

THREE YEARS AGO

It took them two hours to reach Raqqa-Rafiqa.

When they reached the fort, they saw that the fight was underway. Sinbad couldn’t help but feel guilty. He felt he was on the wrong side as hordes of mages battled against the were-hyenas and the Nephilim that Azrael had sent as his army.

‘Well, what a view!’ Azrael clapped his hands. ‘Let’s go in from the back. Otherwise, we’ll be caught in the crossfire.’

Sinbad and Azrael glided past, towards the back entrance of the fort. Sinbad didn’t hurt any of the guards as he entered the fiery fort. He navigated his way away from them and the fire that was everywhere. The guards were fighting Azrael’s soldiers inside.

‘Find her and bring her to me,’ Azrael said.

Sinbad dismounted as he made his way from the open courtyard to the side lanes and alleyways of the fort. He walked upstairs to see a row of rooms just when a guard appeared before him. He stopped in fear, and he didn’t know whether to attack him or not.

.. but he remained frozen.

Until a were-hyena lurched on to the soldier, throwing him off guard.

Sinbad avoided the action. Any blood spilled by him would be bad, he realized, as he didn’t belong to any side. He was neutral.

‘Calypso!’ he cried out loud.

‘Sinbad!’

He began to open the doors, as many as he could, until he reached the one from where the voice came.

But in front of another closed door, he saw there was a turbaned soldier who had a humongous beard and a sword.

Sinbad could see behind him that all of Azrael’s men had their hands full.

What to do?

He pulled out his scimitar.

The guard approached him with a triumphant grin since he was duelling with a thirteen-year-old.

He picked up Sinbad and threw him against the wall.

Sinbad felt a sudden surge of pain shooting down his back and legs.

Sinbad stood to his feet, but the guard threw a punch towards him that Sinbad blocked with his sword, but in the process of doing that, he stabbed the man’s arms, slitting his veins.

The guard began to bleed and Sinbad flustered forward, apologizing and holding his wrists, but he stumbled and fell to the ground.

Sinbad looked at the blood on his hands and could feel the guilt coming up, but he had to rescue Safeena.

He opened one of the doors and finally found her. He immediately hugged her.

‘What is happening?’ she cried.

Sinbad continued to gaze at her, feeling peaceful. Then he swallowed a lump in his throat, saying, ‘It’s okay. Everything will be fine. But we need to leave now.’

‘Where?’

Sinbad recalled Azrael telling him to bring her back to him.

But at least she’ll stay alive with me.

Sinbad shook his head. He took her hand and frantically walked out and away from Azrael, entering one of the rooms that had a window. He stood on the ledge.

‘It’s just one floor. You won’t get hurt,’ he said.

Safeena nodded and climbed out of the window.

It was Sinbad’s turn now. He looked down where Safeena had successfully landed. He saw the ground. He remembered that Reis had once told him to leap and then roll on the ground when he was about to land, putting less pressure on his legs.

And that’s what he did... though his left ankle twisted. He groaned as he stood up, limping.

Sinbad held Safeena by the arm and began to move towards the cactus-infested land until he heard a voice, a very recognizable voice:

‘Sinbad!’

They both turned to see a tall man in a white tunic and black pants, standing opposite them, with a mare at his side.

He pulled out his sword.

Sinbad pushed Safeena behind him, protecting her, as he faced his guardian, his friend and his mentor—Master Reis.

SIXTY-TWO

PRESENT DAY

‘What are you doing here?’

Sinbad walked to Safeena and the first thing he did was hug her. But there was some anxiety and confusion. He could feel it in her bones, so he pulled back. ‘It’s good to see you, Calypso.’

A smile spread across her face. ‘You remember?’

She looked different. Her dark hair was longer. She was no more the untidy girl or the timid little girl in the floral dress. She was in a chest armour. She had wise eyes and her face was a bit muddy, but she still looked perfect.

‘It’s been...’ she said.

‘I know.’ He paused. ‘Don’t do this.’

‘Sinbad,’ she said, ‘this is my destiny. I have to.’

‘I’m sure you must have trained for three years under the guidance of Iblis and I don’t know...’ Sinbad frowned. ‘Just remember one thing ... you told me a person makes his own destiny. Well?’

Her eyes widened when she recalled their chat. ‘As if you are following your own? The last information I got about you was that you were still in Basra.’

‘You didn’t meet me. You were supposed to.’

‘Not really, no.’ Safeena shook her head. ‘I was ...’

‘Feeling guilty for being born on the wrong side? For doing what you were meant to be doing? Angry at the guild? Whatever it was, I just know one thing... I know you are a good person, Calypso. Don’t let anyone take that from you. Never let the world take the good things from you,’ he spoke softly. ‘I always believed in you. Choose your destiny and... leave this.’

She looked at the trumpet that she held in her hands, giving him a sad smile. ‘You always save me.’

‘It’s my job.’ Sinbad smiled.

Safeena smiled back. ‘I was never sure of what I was doing. I was ... I don’t know... I feel confused about what the world wants from me.’

‘And what do you want? Do what you want to do. There’s always a way.’

‘What way? Like the Ninurta Guild that was trying to kill me?’ ‘No.’

After thinking about the people around him, the journey he’d made, the courage that Idris had shown to save the vampires, the bravery Husayn had displayed, the sacrifice that Pressa had made and the love that Ashrafiyah had embraced, Sinbad said, ‘A way to be a better person. A way to be a good, decent human being. After what happened, I began to believe I can’t trust anyone. I thought this world was not worth saving, but I want to. I want to hold on to this world even though it is flawed, it is broken, it still has hope. And as long as there is hope, there is a chance for each of us to be better people. Because you know what that hope is? Us. We are the ones who show our flaws and then fix them. Every day we redeem ourselves, and I believe that is why this world deserves to live.’

Safeena blinked, nodding to herself, and dazedly, she handed the trumpet to Sinbad who dangled it from his baldric. ‘Thank you.’ Sinbad smiled.

‘Baby, baby, baby...’ a voice came from the back.

Sinbad turned his head and saw Azrael clapping slowly while walking through the corridor. He was alone. Dressed in a black suit, he looked rather charming and handsome.

‘You always find a way to create problems for me.’ Azrael shook his head. ‘The Lord of the Dawn is not happy with you, Safeena. You listened to your emotions again. C’mon! We promised you he’d be safe.’ He paused, looking at Sinbad.

‘I know your parents. I know your secret.’

‘The secret of me and Reis?’ Sinbad asked.

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘Boring! But now the Lord of the Dawn feels—and so do I—that both of you are the wrong people to save, so it’s best to kill you.’

‘You can’t,’ Sinbad said. ‘You are an angel.’

‘Correction: I can’t kill anyone on Earth. As far as I am aware, this is not Earth.’ A sinister smile flashed across Azrael’s face.

A weapon emerged from thin air. It was a pale white blade, but before he could do anything, a voice came:

‘Hey, you!’

Azrael turned, so did Sinbad and Safeena. Near the entrance stood Sinbad’s wounded crew. There was Husayn, Markus, Ashrafiyah and Idris.

‘Oh great!’ Azrael said, flustered. ‘The entire gang. How predictable. I suppose it’s me against all of you then.’

And then the fight began.

SIXTY-THREE

THREE YEARS AGO

‘Leave,’ Sinbad pleaded to Safeena.

‘No.’

‘Leave. Be anywhere but here. Otherwise, he will kill you.’

Master Reis’s icy, pale eyes watched them.

‘Now. Please.’

Safeena nodded, kissing Sinbad on the cheek. ‘I will see you again?’

‘I am sure you will.’ Sinbad smiled, and with tears rolling down her cheeks, Safeena ran away into the darkness.

Breathing heavily, Sinbad and Reis walked around in a clockwise circle, facing each other as though measuring each other up for the battle.

They had both drawn their weapons.

Sinbad gripped his scimitar while Reis had his thokcha sword. Sinbad knew that one hit by the sky-iron metal and his sword would perish—it was that strong. He had to be careful, prepare to make a quick dodge and save himself.

Safeena was nowhere to be seen now.

‘You didn’t have to let her go. She’ll be captured by the minions of Iblis,’ said Master Reis. ‘They can track her down in no time.’

‘At least she’ll be safer... away from you.’

‘I didn’t want to tell you,’ Master Reis said as he moved agilely, ‘or you would have felt hurt. But I was the one who suggested killing her.’ His stoic face hadn’t changed expression until now, when he gave a smirk as if he was mocking Sinbad.

Reis came forward with his sword, swinging the blade, but Sinbad ducked his head, swivelled around and slashed his weapon across Reis’s leg.

Reis groaned, bleeding from his knees, ‘Quick. Smart. I’ve taught you well, boy.’

‘I respected you. I looked up to you. You were everything I wanted to be,’ Sinbad screamed. ‘But I was wrong. You’re a liar. You betrayed me.’

‘I was saving the world, boy.’ He stood up straight.

‘I wouldn’t have let a thirteen-year-old’s hormones get in my way.’ Sinbad clenched his jaw as they both hurled themselves at each other, but at the last moment...

He skidded.

Reis’s blade went over him, which he masterfully dodged.

He quickly stood behind his master and stabbed his sword deep into his back.

Master Reis moaned in pain, dropping his sword. He turned around, grabbed Sinbad’s neck and threw him to the ground.

Sinbad’s head smashed against a rock and he began to bleed. In his blurry vision, he saw Reis trying to stop his bleeding...

Before Reis dropped to the ground and died.

And Sinbad’s vision drowned in darkness.

SIXTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY

The fight had begun.

Azrael had multiple weapons at his disposal. The moment Sinbad came forward to fight him, Azrael shoved him with an energy push.

He was flung back, and his chest hurt. He looked up as Idris made her way to Azrael who instantly defended himself with his shimmering white sword, pushing her away with a strong energy discharging from his fists.

Wielding the power of telekinesis, the Angel of Death pushed Markus and Husayn out of the way. Only Ashrafiyah was left standing as she had her arms blocked with a magical shield that she had invoked.

Azrael tried to shove her back, but the shield didn't allow him and she inched closer and closer.

And Ashrafiyah lurched forward ferociously, clawing his face.

He fell back. He massaged the scar on his face ... and it healed.

'He can't die like that,' Ashrafiyah said, looking at Sinbad. 'He's a fallen angel after all. We need something—' Suddenly, she was shoved back violently.

'You pricks.' Azrael stood up, closed his eyes and raised his arm.

Sinbad didn't know what he was trying to do until he felt himself rising in the air. And then he realized, all his friends were suspended in

mid-air, confused.

He looked down at Safeena, who was completely baffled.

Sinbad tried to wriggle out of Azrael's grasp, but it was a strong grip.

'We ... have to ... do something...' Idris said, struggling to speak.

'I know.' Sinbad choked a little when he looked down. 'Safeena.. . now... is a good time to show... whose side you choose to be on.'

'Oh, I have different plans for her. She's too confused to do anything. Always too confused,' Azrael said, sniggering. 'You are all in my grasp, you little idiots. You have troubled me enough.'

Safeena looked up at Sinbad, her yellow eyes blazing. All of a sudden, she lifted her arms, creating a zap of electricity that she shot at Azrael and knocked him over.

Sinbad and his crew instantly collapsed to the ground. Seeing Azrael try to get up, Sinbad took out his sword and yelled, 'Guys, grab his hands and don't let him close his eyes. Let's do this!'

Everyone nodded.

Husayn was the first one to act. He skidded across the floor and jumped on Azrael's back.

Idris somersaulted in the air and grabbed hold of his right hand.

Markus lurched forward and grappled his left, as he tried to move his fingers and wrestle, but he was unable to.

And Ashrafiyah created shields around all of them so they wouldn't be hurt if he tried to use his powers and push them away.

His thokcha sword in his hand, Sinbad sprinted towards the man who turned against him and manipulated him.

‘Don’t! I know about your family. I can tell you about them.’ Azrael wailed and begged. ‘Please.’

Sinbad didn’t care and moved closer to Azrael. ‘You forgot one thing.’

‘What?’

He looked at his crew who were holding on to him tightly, and he smiled. ‘I already have a family.’

And then he plunged the sword into Azrael’s chest. Mercilessly. The Angel of Death roared in pain before shattering into a million slivers of glass.

They all looked at each other and smiled in relief.

‘I think we deserve a piggyback ride on Oggy for this,’ Sinbad said with a chuckle, his sword dropping.

Sinbad looked at Idris whose eyes were on Safeena. She walked up to the Devil’s weapon, while the rest stayed behind, oblivious, as they hugged ecstatically.

He knew what Idris was going to do.

No/ She’s going to kill her.

He tried to break free and step between them, but he was late, as Idris ... shook Safeena’s hand and said, ‘Thanks for the help back there.’

What? What just happened?

Safeena looked at Sinbad for approval, to know whether it was safe to shake Idris’s hand, who nodded and Safeena went ahead.

‘Leave for the ship,’ Sinbad mumbled to everyone as he shared a glance with Idris. And she just shrugged as if it was no big deal.

He wanted to know why she let Safeena live.

Perhaps I’ll get my answer later.

SIXTY-FIVE

THREE YEARS AGO

Sinbad was in his room.

He was sitting alone, looking at his thokcha sword that was passed down to him from Master Reis.

No one knew it was me. Everyone thinks it’s Safeena’s fault. Safeena and Azrael.

Sinbad didn’t want to keep the sword, but he knew it was too prized a possession to leave it behind. He had his bags ready.

It had been more than a month since that fateful day. Not much happened after that except him being charged with treason for going against the state and helping the girl. But at the last minute, he had been granted a pardon since Zarqa, the seer of the guild, prophesized that he would play an important role in saving the world from Iblis in years to come.

It was pure luck. He was actually pretty confused. He had no idea how he would play a role in that kind of a situation.

Sinbad was given a punishment instead, to remain confined to his cell for some days. He was given many scoldings and teachings to not go against the guild. The grand master had come himself and told him it would be his last chance. Next time, he’ll have his head given to him on a platter.

But the worst part was that Safeena’s whereabouts were unknown.

She didn’t return to contact him or perhaps she never would. And perhaps ... that was the last he’d seen of her.

It was a beautiful memory and he would like to keep it that way.

There was a knock on his door.

‘Yes?’

A boy peeked in. ‘I’m the porter, sir.’

‘Yes, yeah.’

‘To take your stuff to the carriage.’

Sinbad nodded, handing him the rucksack, and looked back at his room. Since everyone had a bad impression of him and his training was more or less done, he decided to practise being a Seid independently. And the guild agreed. They wanted him out of there anyway, so they allowed it but with close supervision.

And he had chosen a place as well.

‘Where to, sir?’ the porter asked.

Sinbad didn’t know if this place would be good, if he would make friends there and... whether he would stay there for long.

‘Basra,’ Sinbad said.

SIXTY-SIX

PRESENT DAY

The ship set sail. They were back on Earth and moving towards the north.

Sinbad knocked on the captain's cabin door.

'Come in.'

Sinbad entered and saw Idris sitting on a chair, her purple eyes gazing at the trumpet that they had just secured.

'How's Safeena?' she asked, without removing her gaze from it.

'She's fine. She's asleep,' Sinbad said. 'I wanted to ask you—why didn't you do it?'

'Do what?'

'Kill her. You said you would.'

Idris chuckled to herself. 'When she saved us, I felt I owed her. And I realized she has done more than what the guild is doing for me.'

'What do you mean?'

'The guild has been nothing but unkind, Sinbad. I have done everything for them and even then, they took my husband away. In return, they gave me more missions, more punishments just because I was guilty of

loving someone who wasn’t meant to be loved by their standards. But who are they to decide that? I wanted to be with him, have a normal life.’

She shook her head in frustration. ‘I even volunteered for this mission out of guilt for hurting them, but I realized—weren’t they hurting me?’

Sinbad crossed his arms over his chest and said softly, ‘I told you Safeena has a good heart. She was led astray, guided wrongly.’

Idris nodded. ‘I hope you are right. I’ll keep an eye on her. And you do realize by saving Safeena, we have practically made enemies of the caliph and everyone around.’

‘Do you care?’

‘I care about my husband in the prison.’

‘We’ll save him. We will get him out,’ Sinbad promised her.

‘Damn.’ She laughed nervously. ‘We are going against the crown.’

Sinbad smiled. He walked up to her and patted her hand. ‘We are better than them. We just saved their asses.’

‘Iblis is not dead.’

‘We won’t rest until he is,’ Sinbad said. ‘And as we speak, he must be searching for an alternative to fulfil his desires. We need to stop him as well, captain.’

Idris held his hand. ‘Thank you. But I believe I am not fit to be captain.’ She stood up. ‘I want you to be the one. You were always supposed to lead this mission. I was being an ass, to be honest.’

‘Well, you were.’ Sinbad chuckled. ‘But no, I can’t.’

‘I’m not doing charity. If I didn’t believe you were captain material, I wouldn’t have asked. Now sit your ass down and get ready to save my

husband. I want him out,' Idris said laughingly and Sinbad sat down on the chair, making himself comfortable. 'Gosh, we are freakin' pirates now.'

Sinbad laughed. 'It's all right. Everything will be fine.'

The ship voyaged further.

Safeena had woken up.

Sinbad came to the deck and saw everyone there. Ashrafiyah, in her classic black clothes and a charming smile, was in the corner. Husayn and Markus were together, laughing, while Pressa straddled Markus, sitting on his back, and shouting angrily at him in Chinese. Leaning on her spear, Idris was looking out at the ocean.

Standing next to Sinbad, Safeena whispered in his ear, 'You did it.'

'What?'

'You became a sailor,' she said. 'Like you always wanted.'

'Well, not in the most conventional way.' He smiled. 'But yeah, I have. We are rogue sailors.'

'We have a lot to talk about.' Safeena pursed her lips.

'I have things to tell you about my father. He had alternative plans. I know of them. It can help us stop him.'

'And we shall.' Sinbad said, arching a brow.

Then he looked at his crew—his people, his family. ‘Well, I have mapped out what we have to do next. But first, a sweet revenge.’ He walked to the stern of the ship and removed the trumpet from his baldric. ‘The thing we were searching for so long, which the demons want and the humans too. But none will get it because this is a weapon that none deserve.’

And with that, he threw the trumpet of Israfil out into the middle of the sea.

Everyone gasped in horror.

‘Yep, I know.’ Sinbad chuckled. ‘That was pretty badass.’

‘You shouldn’t have done that.’ Markus frowned.

‘Yeah, that was stupid, lover,’ Ashrafiyah said.

‘Okay, fine, I mean...’ Sinbad began, but Husayn intervened, ‘Well, now I just feel like this entire journey was for nothing.’

‘Okay, calm down, guys.’ Sinbad laughed nervously.

‘I realize I shouldn’t have done that, now that all of you are saying it... but, well, it’s done. I feel we can trust a great goddess in the ocean and a simple-minded Greek god to take care of it and protect it.’ The sea seemed to bob in response. Sinbad smiled. ‘I’m the captain now. So, first and foremost, we need to go back to Baghdad and save Idris’s husband and stop Iblis from doing anything nasty again. And we need a plan.’

They all nodded in unison.

‘So are we pirates now?’ Ashrafiyah asked.

Everyone waited for his response.

Sinbad looked at his friends and said, ‘No, sailors.’ He paused, one side of his mouth lifting into a smirk. ‘We are sailors.’

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